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No. 1155
31 March –
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Gnome

ALLEGATIONS that there was some connection between my donation of £200m to the Labour Party and the go-ahead being given by Mr Prescott for both my mile-high Tower of Gnome skyscraper on the banks of the Thames and my 1000-acre Gnome World of Shopping complex in fashionable Neasden are utterly disgraceful and far fetched.

The idea that a distinguished businessman such as myself would give the Labour Party money with the hope of gaining favours in return is deeply offensive and I am grateful to Mr Prescott for making it abundantly clear how innocent I am. In fact, I am so grateful that I have decided to make a further undisclosed donation to the Labour Party and am looking forward to welcoming Mr Prescott and his family to the opening of the renamed Prescott World of Shopping complex in Neasden where they can enjoy ample parking for all their cars and take advantage of a 100% discount on all our very lovely goods.

Lord Gnome,
Gnome Tower,
Thameside,
London SLE AZ1.

"He's living on borrowed time"

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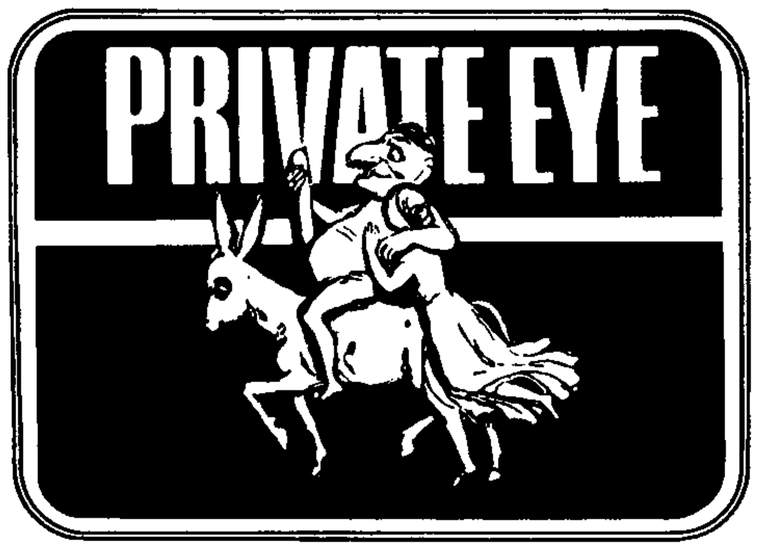
PO Box 326, Sittingbourne, Kent ME9 8FA.
Subscription enquiries: 0870 750 1714 or 01795 414 871
Overseas: +44 (0) 1795 414 870 Fax: 01795 414 555.
Books: 0870 750 1712 **Web:** www.private-eye.co.uk
Email: private-eye@galleon.co.uk

SUBSCRIPTION RATES
£24 per annum. Europe and Eire £32. Airmail (rest of world) £38. Cheques/POs to Private Eye. Mastercard/Visa.

ADVERTISING
Display: 020 7878 2303 Classified: 020 7240 9129

Published by Pressdram Ltd, 6 Carlisle Street, London W1D 3BN. **Printed** by BGP Ltd, Bicester OX6 7QZ. **Distributed** by P.E. Distributions, 6 Carlisle Street, London W1D 3BN. 020 7437 4017.

ABC



Peerless reporting

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100 Years Ago

"I support the Prime Minister's establishment of the Nolan inquiry into standards of conduct in public life, but its remit is narrow. In at least one crucial respect it is seriously flawed, as the funding of political parties is excluded from investigation. Yet this issue best symbolises the decline in standards in political life. This is not a partisan point. There is legitimate concern from all sections of the population that the governing party is being funded from undeclared sources of private and corporate wealth, much from overseas. The Conservatives' unwillingness to declare the names behind large donations is hard to justify… Of course, trades unions give money to the Labour party and sponsor MPs. We must nail the lie that this is remotely equivalent. Money is given openly and declared in our accounts."

– *Tony Blair*, the Observer, *30 October 1994*.

CAPITA PUNISHMENT

QUITTING as chairman of Capita after his £1m loan to Labour was exposed, Rod Aldridge claimed he was stepping down to discourage "entirely spurious" accusations that he was buying influence for his firm.

But his resignation isn't entirely selfless. Aldridge has more than £70m worth of Capita shares, so resigning to try to protect the firm's reputation protects his nest egg too.

The argument that his personal donation is separate from his firm's government contracts is even more open to question. For in all the years of reporting on Capita, *Private Eye* has found two constant features: a crap service matched by a cuddly closeness to Labour and its chums.

Charting Capita's delivery failures, it's hard to know where to begin. The *Eye* first dubbed the firm Crapita in 1999, but its shortcomings were evident long before. It's easy to focus on big national cock-ups like the £400m Criminal Records Bureau fiasco, or the Individual Learning Accounts scheme which was so rotten it had to close; but the *Eye*'s Rotten Boroughs column noted Capita's local difficulties with council contracts as long ago as 1990.

Whether it was writing a £100,000 housing report for Manchester City Council and the DTI which was "poorly organised, difficult to read, and in certain key areas demonstrated a lack of understanding of the issues involved" (*Eye* 740), or cocking up housing benefit schemes in Lambeth, Broxbourne, Bromley and just about elsewhere else, Crapita's service was often expensive and deeply underwhelming.

This run of failure has always been marked by Crapita's closeness to Labour. It employed Labour lord and future Home Office Minister Steve Bassam up until 1999 (*Eye* 974); and hired LLM, the lobbying firm set up by former advisers to Jack Straw, Gordon Brown and Tony Blair, and which still lists Crapita as a client (*Eye* 1045). Ben Lucas, one of the LLM lobbyists, is also active with the Labour-connected think tank, the New Local Government Network, of which Crapita is a prominent funder (*Eye* 1066).

Aldridge has even written pamphlets for the network, but Crapita cash has eased the firm into government circles in other more direct ways. For example, by paying for meetings at the Labour conference addressed by Home Secretary Charles Clarke and Local Government Minister Phil Woolas (Eye 1142).

Aldridge, meanwhile, also put his personal cash into Labour's pet projects, donating £2m to the Darwen City Academy. By coincidence, Capita then won a £178m primary and Key Stage Three education strategy contract from the Department for Education, beating the not-for-profit Centre For British Teachers (CFBT) to the contract but then taking on CFBT staff to do the work (*Eye* 1119).

If Aldridge really wants stories about cash-for-influence to stop, Crapita just has to start doing its job properly and stop splashing the cash at Labour and its friends.

ALDRIDGE, having resigned as chair of Capita, will be able to pay more attention to his new job chairing the Russell Commission, a government-founded charity which encourages youth volunteering. But how did he get the job?

According to the Home Office: "Veredus won a tendering process to manage the recruitment of chair and chief executive of the new Russell Commission charity." And who exactly is Veredus? Coincidentally this "executive recruiter" is a division of Capita, the firm Aldridge partly owns and, at the time of his appointment, chaired.

The Home Office stresses that the shortlist and final appointment were made by "a panel, chaired by Ian Russell, including young members of the board and an independent representative of the voluntary and community sector. Veredus did not make the appointment decision". But Veredus did manage the recruitment process, which would have included encouraging applications from individuals and screening the names from which the shortlist was drawn. That's all right then.

Number crunching

£1m ■ Amount Rod Aldridge of Capita loaned to Labour party

£238m ■ Annual turnover of Capita's business with government

POOR DIDDUMS PT 94

"DR Chai Patel, who ran a healthcare company, was among the businessmen who appear to have decided that he did not want the problems associated with being a Labour donor. Patel, who had not even voted Labour in 1997, had declared two donations of 'more than £5,000' but did not donate again. A friend said: 'Before he donated there was nothing about him in the press. Then afterwards stories about him started appearing in *Private Eye*. He felt it was very unfair'." – *Sunday Times*, 19 March.

"Let me through – I'm a doctor!"

Street Of Shame

THE front page of last Friday's *Sun* was dominated by a photo of Wayne Rooney posing with the World Cup. "Make Our Dreams Come TROO," the paper pleaded, reminding readers that there were "only 77 days to go, folks".

It omitted to mention a pressing engagement he has rather sooner than that – a high court libel action brought by Rooney over allegations that he slapped his girlfriend. Trial is set for 2 May. The defendant? The *Sun*.

In the last *Eye* we wondered if a popular tabloid could really afford to be at loggerheads with England's star player just when Rooney-mania is sweeping the nation. To judge by last week's billing and cooing and Rooing, it seems Wapping has belatedly come to the same conclusion. Expect a settlement soon…

***SUN* editor Rebekah "Name and Shame" Wade remains as consistent as ever in her feelings about "pervs" with an unhealthy interest in schoolchildren.**

"Police Let Paedo Live 300 Yards From School", shrieked a story by the paper's mysterious "The Investigator" on 17 March, alongside another on a 25-year-old "Groping Sir Jailed" after admitting sexual activity with a girl under 16.

The same day's Page 3 was devoted to a full-page snap of topless Zoe, 24, and Nikkala, 23 – both wearing school ties, gymslips and suspenders to promote the paper's free gift of a "super St Trinian's DVD giveaway".

IN September 2003, after the *Sun* had made the mistake of reporting former boxer Frank Bruno's admission to a psychiatric unit beneath the front page "Bonkers Bruno Locked Up," staff, including editor Rebekah Wade, attended a day-long training session organised by charity Sane to teach them how to handle mental health issues more sensitively.

So committed was Wade to the issue that she even brought hubby Ross "Grant Mitchell" Kemp along to take part. "I think they are on alert now not to use some words and to be more careful," commented Sane chief executive Marjorie Wallace.

So how did the *Sun* report last week's news that singer and *Celebrity Big Brother* contestant Pete Burns had checked into a mental health unit suffering from sleep deprivation and exhaustion? With the headline "Potty Pete: Singer Enters Mental Clinic."

Prince Boring

A BIZARRE editorial in the *Sun* thunderously denounces Labour treasurer Jack Dromey for blowing the whistle on Blair's loans. "The first rule of trade unionism is to stand by your mates even when they are in the wrong," it declares. "Mr Dromey has smashed that code to smithereens."

The Dirty Digger may not share this indignation. For in fact the code was smashed 20 years ago when the electricians' union declined to stand by their mates in the print unions – thus making the *Sun*'s move to Wapping possible. Has Rebekah Wade forgotten so soon?

"I've just seen my wife with another man"

***DAILY Mail* readers might have detected a note of scepticism when Sion Jenkins was finally cleared of the murder of his step-daughter Billie-Jo in February. Headlines such as "Billie-Jo: What the jury was not told. As Sion Jenkins is cleared of murder, disturbing questions remain" could even suggest that the paper doubted his innocence.**

But all such doubts were swept aside when the *Mail* paid up for an exclusive interview with Jenkins's new wife Tina Ferneyhough last week. Interviewer Kathryn Knight noted that not everyone in Ferneyhough's family was happy with the relationship: "Her brother was purported to have told friends he thought Jenkins was a gold-digger." Fortunately, "Tina simply waves away this startling slur."

But where could such a slur have originated? In the *Mail*, of course, which in February reported that Jenkins had been "branded a gold-digger by his millionairess wife's family." An anonymous family member told the paper: "Our bets are that he will be off in three or four years. I hope we are wrong, but I would not be surprised if he leaves her."

Knight also informed *Mail* readers that the couple first made contact with each other when Ferneyhough decided to write to Jenkins while he was in prison in July 2004. This contradicts a long article by Geoffrey Wansell three weeks earlier, which quoted a "friend" of Ferneyhough's brother: "They didn't meet by writing when he was in prison. They met on an internet dating site after he'd been freed." Needless to say, that too appeared in the *Mail*.

AMANDA PLATELL picked a difficult target to pour scorn on in her *Daily Mail* rent-a-Slagg column last Saturday. "Joanne Lees, slightly creepy girlfriend of Peter Falconio, murdered in the Australian outback, has signed a book deal to write her memoirs. How much more respectful to Peter's family if she had kept silent and given them the chance to grieve in peace."

Actually there's no evidence that the Falconios have a problem with Lees, whom they supported throughout last year's murder trial. But the *Mail* certainly has a problem, since she refused to cooperate with its hack Richard Shears on his book about the case. Coverage of Lees in the *Mail*, as in Shears's book, has since been consistently negative.

Even so, and despite Platell's fervent wish that the slightly creepy girlfriend had kept silent, it will come as a major surprise if the *Daily Mail* doesn't bid for serialization rights when Hodder publishes Lees' account in the autumn. Stand by to go about!

"STAR's boozy antics shock charity bash for sick kids," shrieked the *Daily Mirror* on 11 March, over shocking pictures of actress Sienna Miller "sprawled on the floor" in various poses which apparently "sparked fresh fears over her party lifestyle."

"At one stage Sienna – ambassador for the Starlight Children's Foundation – rolled around on the floor," panted a breathless Fiona Cummins. "She also sat cross-legged as she played with glowsticks and gestured."

Two things were, however, missing from the *Mirror*'s selection of photographs – one, any alcohol whatsoever; and two, the "seriously ill six-year-old child" with whom Ms Miller was playing a game at the time, who had been cropped out of the frame.

"We are happy to make clear that Sienna was not drunk and did not behave unprofessionally. We have apologised to Sienna," grovelled the rag 10 days later.

ANGRY prize-winners have been inundating the promotions department at Express Newspapers with complaints.

Some concern the Xboxes dished out in a recent *Daily Star* competition – one of which, as *Eye* readers will know, was snaffled by Dirty Des himself for his son. In their innocence, the winners expected their prizes to work and contain English computer games. Alas! They were all fitted with continental-style plugs and adaptors because Des had bought a job lot from Spain to save a few extra quid. Worse, instead of the usual games and demons to battle, they have found themselves pitting their wits matador-style against various bulls in a choice of Spanish bull-rings.

Still, at least they got a prize. Other "winners" still waiting for goodies have been told that they will not be receiving anything at all. As the promotions department explains, the prizes were stored in a warehouse next to the Buncefield Oil Storage facility and went up in smoke when it exploded.

It's a good job it only costs a mere £1.50 a minute to enter Dirty Des's crap competitions. Otherwise entrants might almost feel that someone was ripping them off.

VISITING the editorial floor of the *Daily Star* two weeks ago, Richard "Dirty" Desmond loudly denounced one of its senior production staff as a "traitorous, scruffy, unshaven baldie cunt".

Unusually for a Dirty Des galley slave, the man retaliated. "Are you fucking talking to me?" he demanded angrily.

"I didn't think you could hear me," Des said.

"I think everyone could fucking hear you," came the reply.

As hacks gathered to watch the showdown, panic-stricken editor Dawn Neesom pleaded "No hitting!" Eventually group editorial director Paul Ashford managed to get between the combatants.

Just as well. Only last August Dirty Des had to pay six-figure compensation to *Daily Express* executive editor Ted Young, who had walked out after being punched in the stomach by his proprietor.

WHAT do readers of the *Daily* and *Sunday Express* think of all those front-page stories about Princess Diana? The papers' disastrous circulation figures supply the answer – down by 6.7 percent and 7.7 percent respectively over the past year.

Yet Richard "Dirty" Desmond seems not to have noticed. Amazingly, he has instructed *Daily Star* editor Dawn Neesom to follow the *Express* recipe for success by splashing on Diana as often as possible. Hence last week's Budget Day splash, "Diana Ghost Has Royals by the Ghoulies", which revealed that the spirit of the People's Princess "still haunts the royal family". The story was billed as exclusive, and rightly so given that it hasn't appeared anywhere else.

How long before Dirty Des's *OK!* magazine also has to feature the dead royal on its cover every week?

TONY BLAIR's stickiest moment came at his monthly Downing Street press conference when most lobby hacks got stuck into the PM.

The Dear Leader would have been in even more trouble at his press conference but for the presence of several foreign journalists to whom the PM turned in desperation, knowing their questions would be on arcane overseas matters. Fleet Street tabloid hacks with their hands in the air went ignored throughout the hour's session, but Blair did find time to take a question from a 16-year-old work experience girl who was there for the day.

Spectator associate editor Fraser Nelson also let the side down by asking rambling questions about Iraq – a complete non-story that day. The room groaned. Nelson, whose posh Scots accent makes him sound like the love-child of Malcolm Rifkind, was only there because the *Spec*'s political editor, Peter Oborne, was away, er... carousing at the Cheltenham races!

A REPORT in last week's *Kent Messenger* incorrectly stated that the Maidstone Club in Earl Street, Maidstone, is a lawyers' club. It is a gentlemen's club. We apologise for the error.

Kent Messenger

LAST week the London *Evening Standard* devoted several pages to a BBC programme which exposed the estate agent Foxtons as liars and thieves.

Two years ago the *Standard* itself was offered a very similar expose of Foxtons. The piece was all set to run when the estate agency said it would withdraw all its advertising if the story appeared. Since Foxtons is among the biggest advertisers in the *Standard*'s property supplement, the paper wisely scrapped the story.

In fact Associated Newspapers needs every penny it can lay its hands on. In the latest belt-tightening at the *Standard*, hacks are being given only one copy of the paper per department, instead of one per person.

Mercifully, Letters editor Joshua Neicho, an Old Etonian aged 25, goes to High Street Kensington Tube station every day and buys a huge pile of *Standards* for his colleagues, paid from his own pocket.

"TORY MP Boris Johnson is to write a book about modern Britain," observed the Ephraim Hardcastle column in the *Daily Mail* on 23 March. "The former editor of the *Spectator* will visit all major cities, including Liverpool, where they took offence last year when his magazine accused them of being 'hooked on grief'. Tory leader Michael Howard sacked Boris as arts spokesman, ordering him to apologise to Mersyside folk."

Eh? Howard did indeed order Johnson to make a penitential pilgrimage to the city in October 2004, but he was not sacked until November, when the Conservative leader declared that Boris had lied to him about his affair with his *Spectator* colleague Petronella Wyatt. The facts in the case would be easily verifiable by the Hardcastle column's deputy editor... one Petronella Wyatt.

TREBLES all round! On 10 March Carolyn McCall, managing director of the Grauniad Media Group, sent a congratulatory email to hacks.

"The February ABC figures announced today show a performance of sustained success from the *Guardian* and the *Observer* in a competitive market filled with free give-aways," she wrote. "In its second month in the Berliner format, without any additional promotion, the *Observer* sale was 484,357, an increase of 39,848, or 9 percent, year on year – a sales success based entirely on its editorial strength demonstrating its appeal to readers." Well hip, hip, hooray!

In a similarly upbeat email to staff a month earlier, McCall had written: "Today we have received official confirmation from ABC that the first monthly sale of the Berliner *Observer* is 542,075, up by more than 21 per cent, or 95,257 copies year on year. This figure has exceeded our expectations. It is also the highest sale since we acquired the *Observer* in 1993."

In fact a close reading of the two emails reveals that so "sustained" is the Berliner *Observer*'s success that it lost nearly 60,000 sales in February. If newspapers can't talk to their own staff without spinning the story, what hope is there for their readers?

HACKWATCH

Victoria Sponge

CONGRATULATIONS to Victoria Newton, editor of the *Sun*'s Bizarre column, who picked up the Showbusiness Writer of the Year Award at the British Press Awards last week. Here are just a few of the spectacular scoops she has pulled in over the last 12 months...

7 March: "Bad boy rapper 50 Cent has become the first artist to have three singles in the US top five," Newton points out. Unfortunately the record – an even more impressive five out of five, in April 1964 – is actually held by a little-known outfit called The Beatles.

8 March: "Brad Pitt and Jennifer Aniston are secretly trying to mend their broken marriage," Newton reveals in a front-page Bizarre "exclusive". "Brad, 41, has moved back into the Beverly Hills home he shared with Jennifer, 36. A source said: 'They really want to patch things up.'" "These are made-up stories and non-stop lies," says the couple's publicist. They file for divorce two weeks later.

9 March: "Billie Piper is secretly planning to relaunch her music career, I can reveal," pants a breathless Newton, a few weeks ahead of the actress's debut in *Doctor Who*. "A source said: 'Billie would love to make a return to the music scene... She has been having talks with a number of labels, including Sony BMG, but hasn't put pen to paper yet." Four months later, a still-unsigned Piper tells an interviewer "I care so much more about acting than I do for music. I never really wanted to be a singer in the first place. I'm having the time of my life at the moment."

14 April: "The Westlife boys have come to blows after a massive punch-up," Newton tuts. "I can reveal that tempers are running so high between the lads, I fear this could mean the band is close to calling it a day... the band's only commitment is for one more album, pencilled in for studio time in August. But sources close to the boy band say the rivalries developing mean they are likely to go their own way once the record is complete." Five months on from the album's release, the band remain together.

20 May: "Ladies, it's time to dust off your Union Flag dresses – because the Spice Girls are back," Newton shrieks. "I can reveal the fab five are set to reform for a one-off ten-year reunion concert next summer, so get those platform shoes on and be ready for some serious zig-a-zig-ah... I can't wait."

25 May: "Madonna has a title for her next album – Defying Gravity," Newton confides. "The release date for the album has been pencilled in for January. A source said: 'There is a rockier edge and the usual electronic influence.'" The album is released in November, consists almost entirely of disco tracks and is called *Confessions On a Dancefloor*.

2 June: "Madonna will duet with Sting at London's Live 8 gig on July 2," reveals "the official Live 8 columnist". "It's a collaboration which will go down in history and is perfect for the biggest gig of the decade." And that's not all – in another exclusive, Newton reveals that "The Spice Girls are being secretly lined up to make a comeback at Live Aid II."

8 August: "*Little Britain*'s David Walliams lands Bond Role" reports our mole at MI6. "The funnyman is being lined up for a quirky cameo part as an in-joke for British fans." Over to Walliams for confirmation: "No, I haven't auditioned. I don't know where that story came from."

9 September: "Have Kate Moss and Pete Doherty had a secret engagement?" asks the woman in the know. "The pair held a private party at London's Dorchester on Wednesday night. Some say it was a pre-engagement party to tell pals about their plans to marry. Watch this space..." Naturally, the couple split up within weeks.

30 November: *Scoop!* George Michael has decided to "speak exclusively to the *Sun*" about the new civil partnership law. "Although George supports the new legal rights, he has no plans to marry long-term lover Kenny," Newton reveals. Which comes as something of a surprise to readers of the same day's *Times, Mirror, Express, Daily Record* and *Evening Standard*, all of which carry quotes from an interview with Michael in which he reveals that the couple are planning a "small private ceremony relatively soon after it comes in, probably early next year."

30 January 2006: "McFly frontman Danny Jones has asked to leave the band to go solo – casting doubts over their future," an ashen-faced Newton reports. Er, not according to Danny Jones, who issues a statement via his record company: "I'm really upset by this rumour. No way am I giving up my dream job."

2 February: Hold the front page – "SPICE GIRLS WILL REFORM" shrieks Newton. "Forget the half-truths that keep surfacing – I can tell you for DEFINITE that Geri, Victoria Beckham, Emma Bunton and Mel B have agreed to a tour in November with at least ten, and possibly 12, dates. The live dates will be followed by a greatest hits album and DVD, which will be released in time for Christmas."

16 February: "Coldplay 'split'" claims the headline on Newton's coverage of the Brit Awards. Her column the following day clarifies this slightly. "Coldplay 'no split'."

23 February: "A bitter *Big Brother* battle is on the brink of blowing up," Newton warns. "*BB3* contestant **Jade Goody** is terrified that her crown as Queen Of Reality Telly is under serious threat from Essex Celebrity *Big Brother* winner Chantelle Houghton." One month later, the pair do a joint interview. "I don't see you as a rival, I see you as a big success and I hope you carry on doing well," Goody tells Houghton in, um, the *Sun*.

16 March: "At last some good news on the Spice Girls reunion tour – it's not going to happen," writes Newton, proving that consistency is just as important to her as accuracy. "I can reveal that Mel C and Victoria Beckham have seen sense and realised it is a bad idea. So we can breathe a sigh of relief. It would be cringeworthy." Nothing like the *Sun*'s showbusiness coverage, then.

CALLED TO ORDURE

WHICH titan did the government turn to in the Commons to make a statement about Tony Blair's cash-for-coronets crisis? Commons leader Geoff Hoon? Party chairman Ian McCartney? No. Step forward... Bridget Prentice.

Who she? Prentice is one of the most obscure Labour ministers, a sometime whip so poor at public speaking that when standing at the despatch box she visibly shakes, her voice goes squeaky and she flicks her bulging eyes from side to side.

This hapless ornament to parliamentary debate, an understrapper at the Department for Constitutional Affairs, is normally parked well out of view. But her secretary of state Charlie Falconer sits in the Lords (having got there because he once shared a flat with Blair) and could not appear before MPs. The department's No 2 minister, Harriet Harman, was also *hors de combat*. She had been sent to Siberia because she is married to Jack Dromey, the Labour party treasurer who ignited the donations scandal by "doing a Bolland" and narking on his boss. Prentice it had to be.

Her performance was a disaster, full of hesitant non-answers and desperate insistence that no law had been broken. With even the chancellor and the deputy PM being kept ignorant of the New Labour loans, how on earth could Prentice know?

After one short, sharp question from Tory Eric Forth, Prentice looked as though she was about to burst into tears. Veteran Old Labour MP Chris Mullin also slid in the knife, noting that many of the issues were "matters for her many superiors". Translation: Prentice is so insignificant she couldn't have a clue what had been going on. She certainly couldn't be sure she was telling parliament the truth.

Commons statements are meant to be honest, full reports to the elected House.

Shouldn't this statement have been made by the one minister who admits he knew what was going on – ie Tony Blair himself?

When Prentice mentioned the name of Sir Hayden Phillips, the legendary Whitehall floater who will now make a report on party funding, up went sarcastic heckles of: "It's in the bag!" and "Fix!" It is worth noting that Phillips was chosen by Falconer – the man who masterfully chose Lord Hutton for his inquiry three years ago. Phillips is also chairman of the Royal National Theatre, a juicy sinecure which lies in the gift of that unimpeachably spotless creature Tessa Jowell, Culture Secretary.

'Gavel Basher'

THE office of Information Commissioner Richard Thomas is a shambles – he's short of money and faces a backlog of 700 complaints about public bodies refusing to answer questions under Freedom of Information (FoI) laws. But at least his bosses in London at the Department for Constitutional Affairs (DCA) have their priorities right.

The DCA has handed £100,000 to PA Consulting to look at the organization (*sic*) of Thomas's office in Wilmslow, Cheshire. That sum should just about pay the first year's fees for PA's new director, Lady Barbara Thomas Judge who, among her many other jobs, is also a director of... the DCA!

Thomas himself has struggled to say how long it will take to clear the complaints. When he appeared before MPs this month to discuss "FoI: One Year On", he said it all depended how much money his paymaster, the Lord Chancellor, Charles Falconer, gave him. Just two weeks before the new financial year, Thomas still didn't have a clue.

Even if he does get the extra £1.13m he's asked for on top of his £5m budget (which is unlikely), his backlog still won't be cleared for another year at best.

ANOTHER government IT cock-up has emerged in the shape of the Foreign Office's disastrous "Prism" system.

The ambitious seven-year, £53m project – to bring more than 200 embassies and consulates worldwide on to the same computer system – was exposed in a report by diplomat Norman Ling, endorsed by the Commons foreign affairs committee, as a textbook failure.

Intended to replace 30 different "back office" IT systems for payroll, finance, personnel and procurement, it is far behind schedule and, where it has been introduced, diplomats are tearing their hair out.

As often happens with grandiose IT plans, the need for changes in the way staff operate were overlooked, the risks were greatly underestimated and the potential benefits exaggerated. As one exasperated mandarin put it: "In the FCO's long history of ineptly implemented IT initiatives, Prism is the most badly-designed, ill-considered one of the lot."

Although senior FCO managers were singled out for most criticism for not taking enough interest in such a critical scheme, the consultancy behind the cock-up is Cap Gemini, the firm already running a £3bn IT contract with HM Revenue and Customs and many other lucrative government projects.

Happily, however, help is at hand from a new partner at the firm who, in the words of Chief Executive Mark Porter, "will be of immense value to a business such as ours in which quality and originality of thinking are key to commercial success." Step forward Lord (John) Birt, late of the Cabinet Office and a keen advocate of expensive public sector IT projects.

WHILE the Department for Work and Pensions under then secretary of state Alistair Darling was giving out "inaccurate, incomplete, unclear and inconsistent" information on pension funds, the Treasury was busy using pension funds as an instrument of economic policy.

In 2000 Gordon Brown asked one of his favourites, former fund manager Paul Myners, to look at the way pension and other funds invested their members' money. Among Myners' most important recommendations was to make it easier for pension funds to invest in hedge funds, subsequently made possible under relaxed regulations. Five years on the hedge fund business is booming, helped along in part by the influx of pension fund money, and Myners has duly grabbed a piece of the action by becoming chairman of Liberty Ermitage, a Jersey-based hedge fund manager.

TIRELESS campaigning Lib Dem MP Norman Baker has recently turned his attention to the David Kelly affair... and appears to have drawn attention to himself into the bargain.

Baker's investigations into the untimely death of the Ministry of Defence doctor have already prompted questions over such issues as the police response that Lord Hutton could not be troubled to answer at his inquiry. But they also appear to have attracted the interest of the MoD.

Along with several curious calls to the MP's Sussex-based researcher – some of which are now being investigated by police – there was also an incident when an innocuous call made by the researcher to a friend in Yorkshire was for some reason answered by the MOD's "control operations switchboard".

Mr Baker, however, is more interested in hearing from those involved in the Kelly affair who are keen to expose the truth.

WITH Lord Levy announcing that sourcing loans for Labour "isn't worth the hassle any more", how fortunate that the party is conducting interviews this week for a new Fundraising Officer.

According to the advert, posted earlier this month in *Third Sector* magazine, the successful candidate will apparently "be involved in all aspects of key donor fundraising work where you will be expected both to initiate ideas and fulfil expectations" – the latter, presumably, to ensure that those who have been promised peerages definitely get one and don't go bleating to the papers when the appointments commission intervenes.

Curse of Gnome

THREE weeks ago when Ofwat the water regulator found a series of deceptions at Severn Trent, the former chairman responsible, Sir David Arculus, seemed every bit the unabashed captain of industry as he prepared to become president of the CBI.

Only after the last *Eye* pointed out that the CBI's *raison d'être* (campaigning for an easier time for business) might be undermined did he step down – to the inevitable congratulations from fellow senior suits for his "courage" and "integrity".

Until recently Arculus was also the chancellor's deregulation supremo; and one of the main recommendations in his 2005 report, *Regulation – less is more*, was adopted in last week's budget. But, unlike Philip Hampton, another favoured businessman who proposed deregulation measures, Arculus's name was completely absent from the budget notices implementing his ideas.

HUMBUG OF THE WEEK

"PRIME Minister Tony Blair has been caught red-handed in a party funding scam carried out behind the backs of other senior figures," sniffed the *Daily Express* in an excoriating leader on March 17.

"A Premier who promised his administration would be 'purer than pure' has once again been found up to his neck in dodgy secret deals. The self-proclaimed 'pretty straight kind of guy' is bit by bit being exposed as the sleaziest political leader since David Lloyd George."

The paper did not find space to detail exactly when this dodginess took root. Many date it to the moment, in May 2002, when it was revealed that Labour had taken a £125,000 donation from the millionaire pornographer (and proprietor of the *Daily Express*) Richard Desmond, just days before new rules which meant all political donations had to be declared were brought in, causing outrage among MPs and ministers who had been kept in the dark about it.

DONORS KEBABED

THE admission that Capita's Rod Aldridge **is one of Labour's secret £1m bankers shows that the affair is more than simply about selling peerages. Flogging seats in the upper chamber might be the most obviously sleazy and even illegal activity, but Labour's big business funders are drawn to the party for reasons that go far beyond the chance to wear ermine...**

Nigel Doughty (who gave £250,000 in 2005) is usually referred to as the chairman of Notts Forest. He is; but Doughty is also one half of venture capital firm **Doughty Hanson** and has a business association with Labour lender **Chai Patel.** Doughty Hanson bought most of Patel's Priory Clinic business, and last year a Dutch bank then bought it off Doughty Hanson for a whopping £875m. This meant a huge profit for Doughty Hanson and an estimated £45m for Patel for his remaining shares.

Patel and Doughty can of course both thank the party they have helped for their own big windfalls. Private UK health providers are currently selling at very high prices because investors have every confidence that the government will continue to contract out NHS jobs. Indeed, Labour's policy of handing firms direct contracts for NHS work has created a more buoyant private health business than the Tory policy of trying to drive patients directly into the private sector ever did. The Priory may be best known as a celebrity breakdown service, but as the group says: "70 percent of our patient care is publicly funded."

Venture capitalists figure heavily among those who bankroll Labour, and they are drawn to the party as much by the chancellor as they are by the prime minister. **Sir Ronald Cohen** of **Apax** (he's donated £950,000 since 2002) is closer to Gordon than he is to Tony. He is already a knight; but new honours of a different kind followed new donations. Sir Ronald wants to ease back from venturing capital into charitable giving; and at the time of his latest donations the chancellor appointed him head of his new Commission on Unclaimed Assets. The commission will have the right to seize dormant bank accounts and spend the unused cash on charity.

Cohen's Apax work also fits snugly with government policy. Gordon Brown's tax regimes have rewarded venture capitalists in many important ways. For example, he grants a tax credit for research and development which allows companies to write off chunks of tax. This credit especially benefits investors in high-tech drug and electronic firms – investors like Cohen's Apax, Doughty Hanson and biotechnology investor and secret Labour banker **Chris Evans**, founder and chairman of **Merlin Biosciences**.

Meanwhile other Labour regulations – or the lack of them – have helped party donors in other ways, In 2004 the government's Pensions Bill proposed that venture capitalists should be responsible for the pension funds of the firms they buy. The British Venture Capital Association (members include Apax, Doughty Hanson and Merlin) lobbied successfully against these new rules. Apax partners were criticised by pensioners of the Midlands British United Shoe Machinery firm, who were left with nothing after an Apax-led "restructuring" saw the pension scheme run out of cash.

"Labour donors ate my pension" is also a complaint made by staff at Allders. **Andrew Rosenfeld**, a £1m secret banker, and **David Garrard**, a £200,000 donor, jointly managed **Minerva**, a property developer. Minerva then branched out and bought Allders stores, probably because the group wanted to redevelop Croydon where Allders had its flagship store. However, under Minerva's stewardship Allders did poorly and was put up for sale before it collapsed into receivership, leaving the pension fund empty. Many Allders pensioners blame the Minerva two, but the firm says it has no responsibility for the deficit.

Labour's strong Scottish links helped the party snag one of its largest donors: **William Haughey**, who has given more than £1m. His company, **City Refrigeration Holdings**, has its headquarters on the route of the proposed M74 motorway extension out of Glasgow. He was offered £7m compensation but asked for £17m. Haughey, a long-term Labour funder, asked Scottish First Minister Jack McConnell to look at the compensation correspondence. After McConnell's intervention, and shortly after another £330,000 donation to Labour, the compensation shot up to £16.55m, although all concerned deny any link.

NUMBER CRUNCHING SLEAZE SPECIAL

LABOUR V. TORIES

£1,000

■ Bill for Jonathan Aitken's two nights at the Ritz, paid by Prince Mohammed bin Fahd

£40,000

■ Price of Tony and Cherie Blair's two nights in Sardinia, paid for by Silvio Berlusconi

£25,000

■ Cash Neil Hamilton received to ask parliamentary questions on behalf of Mohamed Fayed's takeover of Harrods

£125,000

■ Donation Labour received before Tony Blair intervened on behalf of Laksmi Mittal's takeover of Sidex

£400,000

■ Cash Conservative party received in secret donation from tycoon Asil Nadir

£14,000,000

■ Cash Labour party received in secret loans from 12 donors

"Sarge goes in, Nobby covers him and I'll write the paperback"

NEWS FROM THE SAND PIT

AS the 16th Air Assault Brigade (aka The Maroon Mafia) prepares for deployment back to Afghanistan, there are one or two issues the lads would like sorted out.

The first is the case of Abdul Rahman, shopped by his own family for the heinous crime of converting to Christianity. When the case against him was dismissed, huge numbers of Afghans took to the streets demanding that his original sentence – execution by firing squad – be carried out as demanded under Sharia law.

It's not just the widely held moral objection to any operation designed to "serve and protect" such a wicked legal system; the troops have a tactical objection too. The word from Kabul is that the decision *not* to execute Rahman will simply encourage another jihad which will come to the boil in time for our boys' arrival.

The second issue is to do with logistics. Despite the word "Air" in the brigade's monicker, there's quite a lot of stuff that needs to be done on the ground. Sure, the brigade will deploy in a media friendly, *Apocalypse Now*-style, rotary and fixed-wing aerial event. But after that pretty much all re-supply, including ammunition, spares and heavy equipment, will have to come by truck from the Pakistani port of Karachi.

There are only two roads north from Karachi to the British AO (area of operations). Both pass through areas where the resurgent Pakistani Taliban, already causing alarm in Islamabad, is consolidating forces with Afghan and Chechen fighters. Squaddies want to know what the rules of engagement are if British supply convoys are attacked while still in a country that is supposed to be Britain's ally in the "war against terror".

So far the silence has been deafening.

'Square Basher'

HIGH PRINCIPALS

SO MUCH for free speech and academic debate. Six students from Lancaster University have failed to overturn their conviction for aggravated trespass for taking part in a demonstration on their own campus *(Eyes passim).*

The six were protesting at a "corporate venturing" conference organized by the university with the likes of BAe Systems, Shell and others whom the students claimed had a history of environmental or human rights abuses. The six entered the conference, briefly addressed the audience and handed out leaflets before they were removed by university staff who called the police. Despite protests and appeals from academics, unions, lawyers, human rights groups and even some of those who were at the conference, Lancaster University pressed ahead with the criminal case against its own students and so far has won.

WALSALL College of Art and Technology (Walcat) is being investigated by the National Audit Office (NAO) over its decision to pay a private consultant to organise hundreds of job cuts.

The college's restructuring plans, which it says are intended to provide "value for money" and to "upskill the workforce", entail abolishing A level provision and sacking 470 staff – then re-employing some of them on worse contracts. Lecturers union Natfhe is fuming and members have already voted unanimously to strike.

Meanwhile, Simon Graham of Durham-based CSM Consulting has been advising on the restructuring since September. The college has already rejected a Freedom of Information (FoI) request from the *Birmingham Post* over exactly how much it is paying Mr Graham per day, but it's undoubtedly a handsome sum compared with lecturers' pay.

The NAO received a complaint from the union in February and told the *Eye* it is still carrying out preliminary inquiries. Has the college no managers of its own to deal with this kind of thing? Its accounts reveal that it's paying the senior management team £435,000 a year, with principal Chris Ball being paid £104,000.

ETVE

A Public Service for All: the BBC in the Digital Age (HMSO)

IN its white paper on the future of the BBC, the government begins by acknowledging the "remarkable speed" with which the media world is changing. Indeed; and given this you wonder if the document itself should have taken the form of a conventional pamphlet, even one made available simultaneously online.

How much more appropriate if the white paper had itself taken broadcast form, either on DVD or as a podcast, with Tessa Jowell hosting, and David Lammy and her other junior ministers playing Paul Heiney and Chris Serle to her Esther Rantzen.

The problem with any such production, though, is that the voices and faces of the hosts would betray the sheer peculiarity and confusion of what the politicians are asking the BBC to do. Some of the demands are so bizarre – such as "sustaining citizenship and civil society" – that they are better left to the assertive power of cold HMSO print.

But the document's biggest risk comes in the section when Ms Jowell briefly becomes a Garry Bushell or Nancy Banks-Smith and attempts to establish criteria for establishing whether a programme is any good. This part of the paper sets out five qualities which BBC programmes should fulfill. They should be "high-quality", "challenging", "original", "innovative" and "engaging". For some reason (possibly the subliminal influence of the Olympic rings), the quintet of ambitions is central to New Labour politics. The electorate is already under instruction to eat five portions of fruit and vegetables a day. But these rules for good viewing are completely bananas.

The first obvious objection is that the virtues at which programme-makers are being asked to aim are largely a matter of opinion. For example, a new police series might seem "innovative" if you are young-ish and have not watched very many, but not if you are over 40 and grew up on *The Sweeney*. However, aware of the trap of relativism into which it may be falling, the white paper helpfully defines its terms. An "engaging" programme, for example, is one which "should draw the audience in with fascinating and entertaining subject-matter".

The problem with that, of course, is that "fascinating" and "entertaining" are equally slippery concepts. A very small number of people might be genuinely fascinated and entertained by a BBC documentary on

Clement Attlee; a rather greater quantity would have the same reaction to a football or cricket match.

But the key question in deciding what kind of programmes a network makes is whether their products are aimed at people already interested in a subject or are attempting to make them popular with those who are not. By treating "fascination" and "entertainment" as if they are absolutes, the government completely avoids this vital issue.

Some viewers may detect tautology, suspecting that "original" and "innovative" are almost synonyms. But this is not illiteracy. "Original", in this context, means British rather than American, made specifically for the BBC rather than bought in from abroad and, possibly, that the show is being screened for the first time rather than repeated.

Admittedly, unlike with the fruit, you don't have to get all five in a line. We are told that "all BBC content should display at least one of these characteristics". But, simply by applying the five desired virtues to the BBC schedules for this week, we see the lunacy of the rules.

The BBC1 and 2 listings for Sunday 26 March contained 13 repeats, which, unable to be original, would presumably have to qualify on the grounds that they met one of the other four benchmarks first time out.

The latest edition of the 30-year-old sitcom *Last of The Summer Wine* doesn't obviously seem to obey any of the DCMS objectives. Being made in Britain for the BBC might just pass as "original" but can something familiar for three decades really still be considered original? The show might just make it under "engaging", because it is fascinating to those who are fascinated by it, but then almost every television programme in existence, with the possible exception of the motoring game-show *Petrolheads*, has fascinated somebody.

In fact, a horrifying number of BBC shows – including *Through the Keyhole*, *Girl Cops* and *Car Wars* – are going to have to invoke this get-out clause that they are interesting to people who are interested in that kind of thing.

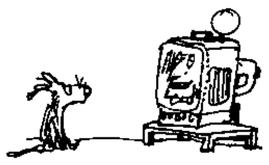
More worryingly, two of the worst programmes of recent years – Alan Titchmarsh's *The British Isles: A Natural History* and *Davina* – would have scored an easy two out of five, as they were both original and innovative, in that neither of the presenters had attempted these formats before. The fact that they were also astonishingly awful shows how futile these prescriptions are.

The only system of control that has ever changed the ways of broadcasters was the old IBA quota approach: so many hours of religion, arts, drama, science, etc. In choosing to test television against concepts which can mean whatever they need to mean, the government has effectively left the corporation to make whatever it wants.

The key to what's happened is in another of the weird new demands imposed on the BBC: "building digital Britain", which means persuading people to buy new TVs. What government cares about now is the box, not what's in it.

'Remote Controller'

MEDIA NEWS



WHEN human resources staff gathered at White City to hear an announcement about their future once they have been "outsourced" to Crapita on 1 April, the announcement was met with "stunned silence followed by laughs of disbelief", reported *Ariel*.

To cut costs and boost profits for itself, Crapita intends, without any tiresome consultation, to move 190 jobs from London and 70 more from the regions to Belfast.

Many of those affected say they won't go and that they "feel betrayed by the decision".

Crapita has offered to find alternative work at equivalent grade and salary for those who don't want to go. But this is a sham. There are no alternative jobs because the BBC, as Crapita knows, is slashing staff across the board.

STOP PRESS: The number of staff feeling angry and betrayed is about to grow. The BBC is hoping to outsource its engineering training and technical services to… Crapita!

JUST FANCY THAT!

"LATE SPRING – Prolonged Winter to Blame"
– Caption BBC News 24.

SOLICITORS for former Labour spin doctor Tim Allan sent out stern letters to the national media last week, warning that any stories based on documents stolen from Allan's briefcase in January would be in breach of their client's confidence.

This refers to notes which Allan, now head of Portland PR, prepared for Sky's new head of communications about how the Murdoch broadcasting giant could ingratiate itself with key members of the Labour administration, of which Allan was once part (*Eyes passim*).

Allan's commitment to commercial confidentiality only goes so far, however. Last year, he sneakily obtained a videotape of John Humphrys making unflattering comments about government ministers and leaked it to his old friend Tom Baldwin of the *Times*. The remarks had been made at the Communication Directors' Forum, also attended by Allan, which was meant to be a private conference.

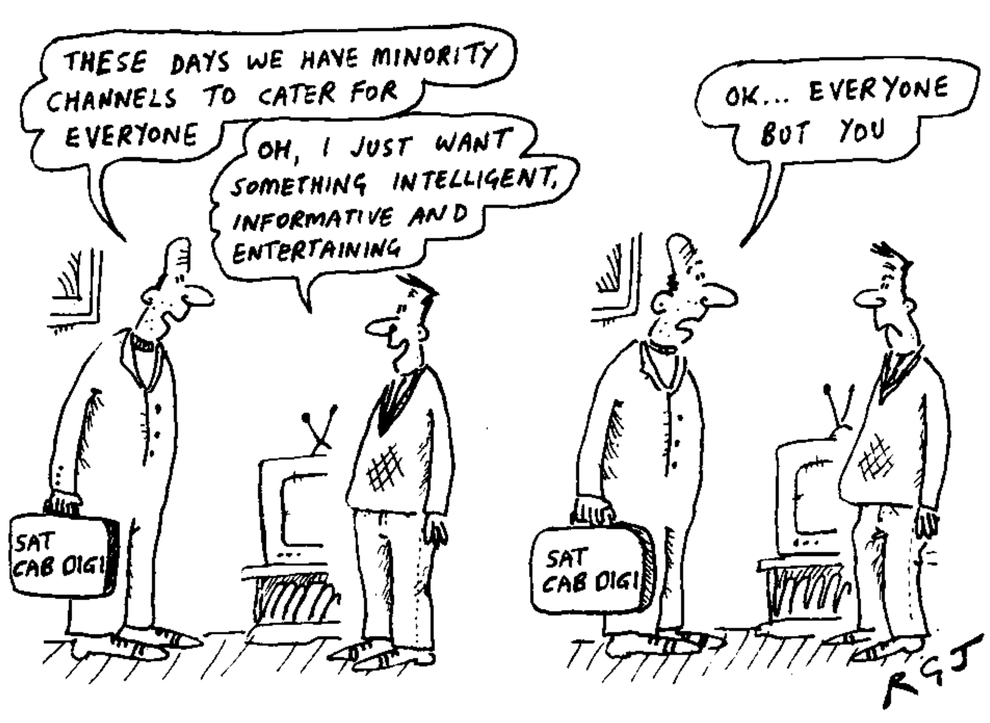
LUVVIES

"When I'm not on the road, I spend a lot of time sitting around in my apartment in my underwear. And though it may sound very egotistical, I find it helpful to look at myself in the mirror. It gives you a kind of perspective."

MARTHA WAINWRIGHT (singer)

Submitted by Austin McHale.

An occasional column devoted to gems from the acting profession. £10 paid for entries.


THESE DAYS WE HAVE MINORITY CHANNELS TO CATER FOR EVERYONE
OH, I JUST WANT SOMETHING INTELLIGENT, INFORMATIVE AND ENTERTAINING
OK... EVERYONE BUT YOU
SAT CAB DIGI
SAT CAB DIGI
RGJ

DUMB BRITAIN

The Big Quiz, LBC

Gary King: Who was Mary Arden's famous son?
Contestant: Can I have a clue?
King: Yes. He was famous around the Globe.
Contestant: Bill Gates.

Breakfast Show, Radio 1

Chris Moyles: Which "S" is a kind of whale that can grow up to 80 tonnes?
Contestant: Um...
Moyles: It begins with "S" and rhymes with "perm".
Contestant: Shark.

Quizmania, ITV1

Greg Scott: We're looking for an occupation beginning with "T".
Contestant: Doctor.
Scott: No, it's "T".
"T" for Tommy.
"T" for Tango. "T" for Tintinnabulation.
Contestant: Oh right... *(pause)*... Doctor.

In The Courts

WHY has Mr Justice Collins apparently been keeping the recent spate of contentious appeals from the General Medical Council, including the cases of Labour benefactor Dr Chai "Diddums" Patel and Professor Sir Roy Meadow, to himself?

The GMC no doubt thought it had the answer when it came to last month's high court hearing into the GMC decision to strike off Sir Roy, over the deeply flawed evidence he presented in the case of Sally Clark, wrongly jailed in 1999 over the deaths of her two sons, three-month-old Christopher and two-month-old Harry.

Lawyers for the GMC asked the judge if he should excuse himself from hearing Meadows' appeal because the GMC had sat in judgment on the judge's brother – "high society psychiatrist" Dr Mark Collins, over allegations of sexual impropriety with a vulnerable female patient. While the GMC *cleared* Dr Collins of serious professional misconduct and found the sexual allegations unproven, it did publicly criticise him for crossing patient-doctor boundaries by meeting the patient outside of work and "allowing his head to be turned" by a pretty patient. GMC lawyers also pointed out that the barrister representing his brother, Nicola Davies QC, was also representing Sir Roy.

Mr Justice Collins could see no potential conflict resulting from his brother's clearing by the GMC and said that he did not know Ms Davies. He then went on to deliver a judgment which not only limited the powers of the GMC to regulate doctors who give inaccurate and misleading evidence to courts, but also gave greater protection from sanction from any old "expert" who gives evidence, no matter how dodgy. The ruling has come in for critical scrutiny and is being appealed by the GMC.

But should Mr Justice Collins have removed himself from hearing the GMC case against Labour benefactor Chai Patel, who continues to stamp his feet at not getting a peerage? *Eye* readers are well aware that the case against Dr Patel related to Lynde House in west London, then run by his firm Westminster Care Homes, where there were widespread allegations of neglect. It was the first test of whether a doctor should be disciplined over the care of patients who he was not directly treating. But it was thrown out by Mr Justice Collins before it ever got underway on the grounds that the charges brought against Dr Patel by the GMC were a "rotten indictment" and looked like scapegoating.

As everyone knows, Dr Patel is the man behind the Priory group of health and rehabilitation clinics… and Mr Justice Collins' brother, Dr Collins, was a clinical director at the Priory clinic in central London and now, according to its website, works at the Priory Hospital in Roehampton.

In The Irish Courts

IT'S been a hectic month for Giovanni di Stefano, the peripatetic Italian lawyer whose adventures have long been chronicled in the *Eye*.

As "legal adviser" to Slobodan Milosevic, he was quick to hold forth about "mysterious circumstances" surrounding Slobo's death. As "legal representative" to Kenneth Noye, he pointed out that Noye couldn't have been involved in the Securitas heist since "he has been in custody for a number of years". Billed as Ronnie Biggs's "legal representative", he called for the ailing great train robber's release from jail. He then demanded that another "client", former Iraqi foreign minister Tariq Aziz, be transferred to Moscow for medical treatment. He even contrived to muscle in on the David Mills scandal by giving the media his expert opinions on Italian legal processes.

As if that weren't enough, di Stefano has been busy in the Irish courts on behalf of notorious gangster Patrick "Dutchy" Holland, who is trying to overturn a 1989 conviction for possessing explosives. But here he has come spectacularly unstuck.

This month Holland applied to the high court in Dublin for di Stefano to represent him at the upcoming appeal. The Irish chief justice, Mr Justice John Murray, said that di Stefano must first file an affidavit setting out his legal qualifications and status.

A reasonable precaution, given di Stefano's history. In January 2004 a British court also questioned his legal credentials, when he acted for timeshare fraudster John "Goldfinger" Palmer in his appeal against a £2m compensation order. At that hearing, counsel for the Prison Service revealed that under the name John di Stefano he had 19 previous convictions in England, one in Ireland and others in Italy. In March 1986 an Old Bailey judge sentenced him to five years for taking part in a £25m fraud, describing him as a "swindler without scruple or conscience".

To di Stefano, however, Mr Justice Murray's request earlier this month was clear proof of a conspiracy against him by Irish judges, barristers and perhaps even politicians. He promptly launched a defamation action against the chief justice in the English courts and called for an independent inquiry to "restore the integrity of justice". He also sent the chief justice a hysterical letter which (according to the judge) contained "scandalous material".

Alas, this merely confirmed suspicions about his ignorance of Irish law. As Murray told "Dutchy" Holland during a courtroom exchange about di Stefano, "you should and he should know that it is improper for anyone to write directly to a judge involved in the case".

In his judgment last week, Murray refused Holland's application for a two-month adjournment in the appeal case, saying that its only object was to distract attention from "the real question", namely di Stefano's status. The self-styled lawyer had failed to provide "one piece of paper from a professional body authenticating his legal qualifications. As far as I am aware he has never done so anywhere."

One can only hope that this doesn't sour his relations with "Dutchy" Holland, who is due out of jail on 7 April after serving a sentence for drugs offences. Holland has some pretty rough associates – notably the gang led by jailed drugs baron John Gilligan, for whom di Stefano now also acts as "lawyer and publicist".

It was Veronica Guerin's investigations into the Gilligan mob that led to her assassination. The gardai believe Holland pulled the trigger that killed her, though he denies it. "But whether he was indeed the trigger man or not is, at the end of the day, irrelevant," the Irish *Daily Mail* commented last week. "Because the one thing even the silver-tongued Giovanni di Stefano cannot dispute is that Holland was up to his neck in the activities of the Gilligan gang, one of the most odious groups of men ever to walk the face of this earth."

As an old chum of Saddam Hussein and Serbian warlord Arkan (or so he claims), di Stefano seems to get on well with thugs. No doubt his charming new Irish friends will remain equally enamoured.

WORLD OF SPORT

THE sporting measures in last week's Budget make it look as if Gordon Brown has dropped the baton with all the ease of an English relay runner.

The first false start is the amount he is offering towards Britain's 2012 Olympic hopefuls' training. It is not even halfway towards the £600m headline Brown boasted: £300m is lottery cash that had long before been allocated, while £100m is to come in commercial sponsorship, to be raised by Tessa Jowell's department.

Unless they go cap in hand to Berlusconi, they are unlikely to get anywhere close to their targets, which means the funding will run out around May 2011. "What government is going to preside over widescale funding cuts for Olympic athletes on the eve of the Games?" as one senior sports official asked last week.

Potentially the biggest own goal for Brown could be the "Schools Olympics" proposal, with the first event planned for Glasgow in six months' time. This sort of thing normally take two years for local teams to put together meetings, as with the English Schools' swimming or athletics championships. Brown is proposing something five times bigger but put together in a quarter of the time: a big ask, as they say.

Favourites to provide the organisational leadership are the Youth Sports Trust, an educational charity. And who might be the brains behind such a proposal? Step forward Sue Campbell, one of a handful of apparatchiks at UK Sport who recently awarded themselves a five-figure pay rise (see *Eyes passim*). As chairwoman of UK Sport, former PE teacher Campbell was the chief author of the Olympic spending plan. She is also the chief government adviser on PE in schools.

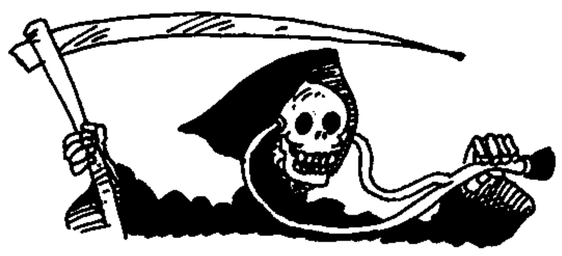
The "serious cash" likely to be lavished on the Schools Olympics over the next six years ought to be enough to ensure a secure future for the otherwise marginalised YST, although some might question why it has been chosen for the task, given that it has never organised a major event of this type before.

And who is chief executive of the YST? Sue Campbell.

SUPERMODELS

KERBER

KATE MOSS IS HAVING ACUPUNCTURE IN FIGHT AGAINST DRUGS:
IT INVOLVES AN IRRITATING LITTLE PRICK!
NEEDLES
DON'T BRING PETE INTO IT!
NEEDLES



DOING THE ROUNDS

"As a patient, trying to compare different NHS organisations, I often don't know where to start," said Anna Walker to the Commons health select committee.

Ms Walker also happens to be chief executive of the Healthcare Commission, which admits that patients will not be able to compare the performance of independent treatment centres (ITCs) when they are offered a full choice of service providers in 2008. This makes a mockery of Labour's much-trumpeted patient choice programme.

As M.D. pointed out when exposing the Bristol heart disaster in 1992, unless patients have access to accurate outcome data they can't make informed choices. The fact that they still won't be able to sixteen years later is as big a failure as all Labour's other health reforms lumped together. The Bristol Inquiry, chaired by Ian Kennedy, promised to put quality and safety at the top of the political agenda back in 2001, and there were some grounds for optimism when Kennedy was installed as chairman of the Healthcare Commission (formerly the Commission for Health Improvement). Alas, the political agenda quickly moved on to access and throughput, and the HC is both clueless and toothless on comparative health outcomes. So we're still choosing hospitals on the basis of hanging baskets and car parking.

Bribing private providers to enter the market with no comparison other than cost has turned out to be very costly. The most recent in a long line of winners has been St Mary's ITC in Portsmouth, run by Mercury Health. It was contracted by local PCTs to perform 330 cataract operations in three months. It managed just 60, costing the taxpayer £5,590 per operation – or six times the standard NHS rate. Mercury Health Group Strategy Director Mark Smith thinks he knows where the blame lies: "It's up to GPs to refer the patients and I'm not sure they are really offering choice. Most are just referring where they always referred."

And why not? Unless GPs have validated evidence that a new service is at least as safe and effective as the one they're used to using, they'll stick with what, and who, they know. The need for this data is all the more pressing as concerns are raised about the quality of ITC surgery. As **Angus Wallace**, professor of orthopaedic and accident surgery at the University of Nottingham, puts it: "The number of (ITC) patients we are seeing with problems resulting from poor surgery – incorrectly inserted prostheses, technical errors, and infected joint replacements – is too great... Junior specialists have been imported and asked to provide total surgical care without help and supervision from a more senior colleague – a situation that is alien to many of them. They do not have a senior colleague to turn to for help with difficult cases, nor if things go wrong – hence the reason why the failures find their way to the NHS hospitals."

Had robust quality control been in place before ITCs were introduced, errors would be picked up sooner and the government would have ditched its absurd "additionality" rule preventing senior NHS surgeons helping out the more inexperienced ITC staff. But Labour's aim has been to divide the NHS, introduce hasty competition and create "constructive discomfort" instead of cooperation. The accelerator of Payment By Results was introduced before the brake of Practice Based Commissioning, and debts are now out of control. Good hospitals are forced to suspend surgery and face closure, while ITCs get paid whether they do the work or not. And as for the quality of the work, patients don't know for sure until their new hip falls out.

M.D.

BLOOD NOTES

No wonder the Department of Health gives itself a clean bill when it comes to its handling of the contaminated blood scandal which condemned thousands of haemophiliacs to death and prolonged illness from HIV and hepatitis C (see last *Eye*).

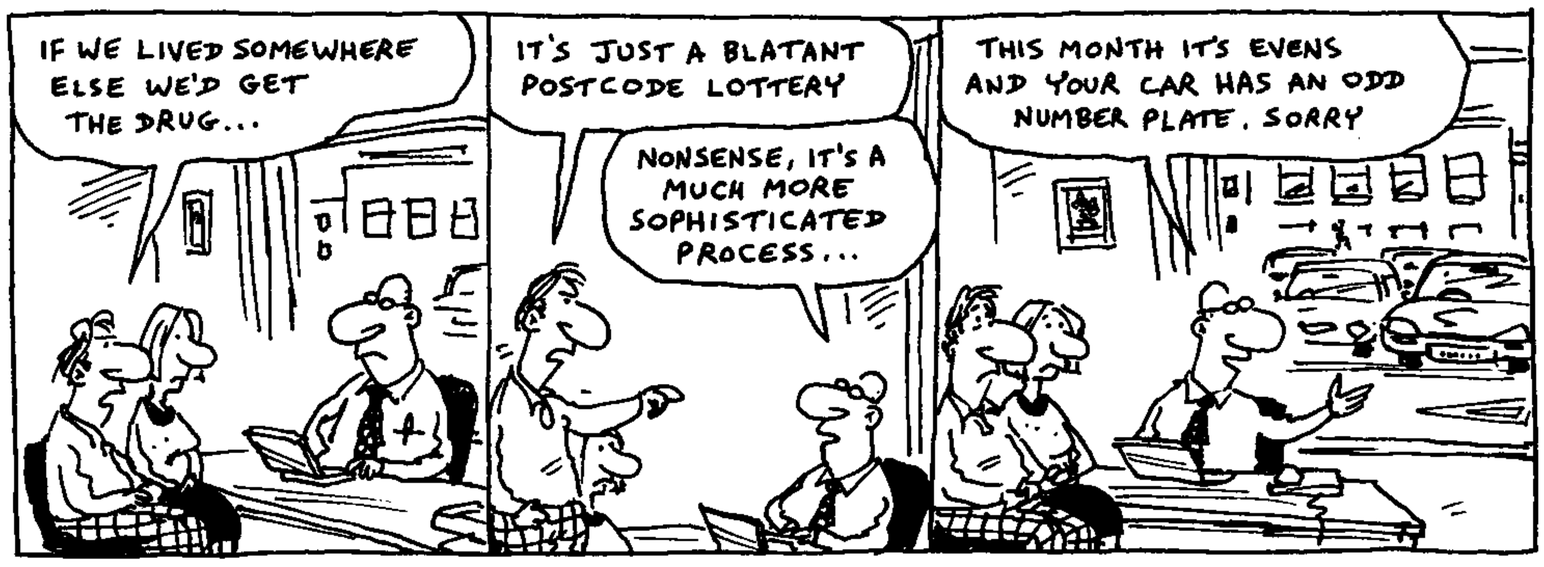
It has now emerged that huge chunks of evidence have been shredded!

Earlier this year Shadow Health Minister Stephen O'Brien asked for a list of files and information held by the DoH relating to its use of imported blood products, in particular those sourced from inmates in the US jails.

Health Minister Caroline Flint has now told him that "many papers" were not properly archived after the HIV litigation and were destroyed in the early 1990s. And a whole lot more gathered together for the advisory committee on virological safety were destroyed "in error between July 1994 and March 1998". How convenient.

off your trolley

REEVE & WAY


IF WE LIVED SOMEWHERE ELSE WE'D GET THE DRUG...
IT'S JUST A BLATANT POSTCODE LOTTERY
NONSENSE, IT'S A MUCH MORE SOPHISTICATED PROCESS...
THIS MONTH IT'S EVENS AND YOUR CAR HAS AN ODD NUMBER PLATE. SORRY

Down on the Farm

Not since foot and mouth five years ago have the politicians and officials responsible for our farming industry perpetrated such an unmitigated shambles as that which has engulfed the Rural Payments Agency, the body set up in 2001 by Mrs Beckett (aka Rosa Klebb) to hand Brussels subsidy payments to English farmers.

In 2005 the RPA, under its chief executive Johnston McNeill, was asked to administer the new single farm payment scheme, the system devised by the EU to merge its complex system of farm subsidies into one annual payment based on a farm's land area.

Across most of Europe, including Scotland and Wales, the money from Brussels was paid to farmers, as planned, by the end of 2005. But McNeill, as reported here in January, paid £18m to a firm of consultants, Accenture, to devise a uniquely complicated new IT system to administer the payments in England. Although the fee payable to Accenture (motto "high performance delivered") soon doubled to £37m, its software proved not to work. As their payments failed to arrive by the promised date, desperate farmers were forced to borrow huge sums from banks, at a cost of £25m in interest charges, and to ask hundreds of agricultural suppliers to wait for their bills to be paid. In January Lord Bach, the latest underling appointed by Rosa to act as her "farms minister", promised that by March all problems would be sorted and most of the money delivered.

When March came, it was clear that Lord Bach was talking through his hat. Fewer than 7 percent of farmers had received the money they were owed. The RPA's ludicrously expensive IT system was in a worse shambles than ever. As farmers' debts soared ever higher, even Rosa realised this chaos was not looking too good. On 16 March, in an emergency statement to MPs, it was announced that McNeill had been suspended from his £160,000-a-year post.

For McNeill this represented the second massive career failure in a row. He had previously been head of the Meat Hygiene Service, the body set up by Maff in 1995 to enforce EU legislation on the meat industry. This played a key part in the drama whereby, wholly unnecessarily, Britain lost three quarters of its abattoirs, leaving vast tracts of the country without a slaughterhouse.

But McNeill's departure has done nothing to improve matters. Almost immediately the agency's IT system crashed yet again, losing quantities of data. The word from inside the RPA is that many farmers cannot hope to be paid until midsummer at the earliest. Typical of protests going up from all sides is that from Peter Clarke, chairman of the Cornish NFU, who points out that this chaos is having "a terrible impact on the whole of the rural economy". "Mr McNeill," he goes on, "appears to have been completely blind to the economic and human" consequences of the RPA's failure. But he is not slow to identify where the real blame lies: "Mrs Beckett must have had knowledge of how shambolic this agency was."

As Hugo Swire MP puts it rather more succinctly: "Instead of sacking the guy running the RPA she should sack herself.". Meanwhile, despite suspending McNeill, Rosa has allowed him to continue drawing his £160,000 a year.

'Muckspreader'

SIGNAL FAILURES

Jams tomorrow

Alistair Darling's favourite tactic as Transport Secretary is to divert attention from his inaction to projects that are far off in the future or barmy.

His latest speech about rail's future was swallowed whole by hacks, even the bit on double-deck trains. Double-deckers are common in countries where railways were built for wider and taller trains but were claustrophobic when tried in Britain in the 1950s and 60s (when people were smaller than today). Modern double-deckers would need rebuilt structures along each route including station platforms, which could become incompatible with normal trains. How will that be funded when the simpler option of longer single-deck trains, with platforms extended where necessary, is apparently unaffordable?

Some hacks were excited by Darling's talk of an eventual replacement for the intercity 125, apparently unaware that the project is years late. Three years ago the government received a positive feasibility study on a north-south high-speed line but a year ago Darling said the idea would be "considered". Now he says it will be "examined"... by Rod Eddington. Airlines won't like the idea of trains decimating their domestic business, so former BA chief Eddington is just the man to find reasons for Darling to continue stalling.

'Dr B. Ching'

ROTTEN BOROUGHS

BLACK HOLE

THE BBC's annual Children in Need appeal boasts that "every single penny... you donate finds its way to a charity or project that works to improve the lives of children and young people throughout the UK".

Projects such as Sheffield City Council's Red Tape Studios (RTS), which received £19,400 from Children in Need (CiN) in 2002 to put 72 disturbed teenagers on a music technology course.

Not a penny was spent on new students, however. Instead the cash was used fill a black hole in the project's accounts and council staff pressured Red Tape employees to falsify documents which suggested that new pupils had attended the course. Existing pupils, who had not benefited from CiN cash, appeared on TV on the *2002 CiN night* as evidence of the appeal's money being well-spent.

Red Tape's then manager, Frank Wilkes, applied for the CiN grant in good faith in March 2002. The application stated that £19,400 would enable 72 students to attend, and was successfully awarded in August. CiN rules are clear that grants can only be used for the stated purpose. However, in December 2002 members of the council's employment unit, which manages the Red Tape project, were already investigating other ways of spending the money. In the minutes of a meeting between Ged Higgins, a contract manager, Teresa Jolley, the council's employment unit manager, and others, Higgins is recorded as stating that "no specific activity has been undertaken on the contract but RTS were investigating whether they could count the 14-16 year olds who attend via school provision. I strongly suspect that this will not be permissible for obvious reasons of double funding".

In August 2003 Whied Latif, the RTS assistant manager, was ordered by Ms Jolley to incorporate the details of another course funded from other sources into the CiN report. Latif did this, but refused to sign the document because he knew it to be false; Frank Wilkes also declined, so it was completed by Ms Jolley and another colleague, Tony Tweedy. It said that 79 students (even more than had been promised) had successfully gone through RTS thanks to CiN funding. The truth was that the appeal's money had been swallowed up by an operating accounting deficit at RTS of £100,000, and no extra pupil was found. Courses which had already been paid for by local schools and Sheffield taxpayers were paid for once again by Children in Need.

When RTS staff brought the mis-use of the funds to the attention of Steven Farnsworth, Sheffield's director of education, a cursory inquiry by him established no wrongdoing. Last week a council spokesman told the *Eye:* "The grant of £19,440 awarded in 2002 by BBC Children in Need to fund music technology courses at Red Tape Studios was used for this purpose. [It] was one of a number of funding streams... [CiN] have been provided with evidence that the grant was spent appropriately... and that the intended recipients of CiN funding had benefited from the music technology programme."

● EYE 1149's item about the all-day free bar provided for councillors at the Sunderland air show last July, while the council and police had imposed an alcohol ban for members of the public, has had an unfortunate result for aircraft enthusiasts. Brian Daugherty, who has voluntarily run a website for Sunderland's North East Aircraft Museum for nine years, thought our story was interesting and posted it on the site. The museum's committee, however, was not amused. It ordered him to remove the story, for fear of upsetting the council, which "has been very supportive of the museum for the past 22 years". Not being a fan of either toadying or censorship, Mr Daugherty did remove the story – along with all the rest of the website's content.

WONDERFUL WORLD

ROCHDALE council is looking for a new borough solicitor. An ad in the *Local Government Chronicle* boasts: "Rochdale has the best of both worlds. Our new borough solicitor will inherit innovative, impeccable democratic services staff, supporting healthy local democracy."

Indeed. So healthy is democracy in Rochdale that the current borough solicitor, Bill Warley, doesn't allow members of the public to photocopy the register of members' interests, although they are allowed to inspect it.

So healthy is democracy in Rochdale that if a planning application is rejected by the elected committee against the recommendations of the planning officers, and then subsequently accepted on appeal, the committee must bear the cost of that appeal themselves. The first such charge – £6,000 – was made last month against the township planning sub-committee. If officers mess up, however, the bill is picked up by the taxpayer.

According to the ad: "Massive regeneration and innovative partnerships are transforming our borough". This may refer to plans to develop the former Akzo chemical plant in Littleborough, where Bellway Homes pulled out because the site was so contaminated. Or perhaps the Spodden Valley (*Eyes passim*), which was earmarked for development by the council despite being contaminated by thousands of tonnes of asbestos.

The ad stipulates that "the appointee will promote high standards of performance and conduct". Should be a breeze at a council where the leader, Alan Brett, has been successfully prosecuted for assault (*Eye* 791). Brett sits on Rochdale's planning committee and also works as a "planning consultant" for developers in adjoining boroughs. That must be what they mean by "the best of both worlds".

● THE fallout from the £3m fraud perpetrated on Lambeth's housing department could have an interesting effect on the appeal of Alex Owolade, the homeless persons adviser who was sacked in 2001 after exposing widespread racism in that department (*Eyes passim*). All but one of the council's witnesses against him have either been sacked, suspended or are on long term sick leave. In contrast, none of Owolade's 11 witnesses have been tainted by the fraud in any way.

THE PRICE IS WIGHT

ISLE OF WIGHT council has managed to get through six chief executives in as many years. The island used to manage without a chief exec at all, but in 1998 it was decided to revive the title.

The incumbent clerk to the council, Felix Hetherington, was made redundant, trousering a payoff of some £108,000, plus a £25,000-a-year pension. His replacement, Bernard Quorroll, arrived from Kingston-upon-Thames on a five-year contract at £106,000 a year. Half way through his term, as returning officer he cocked up a 2001 general election count, giving the Isle of Wight the dubious distinction of being the last constituency in Britain to declare its result. This resulted in Mr Q being packed off by the then Lib Dem administration at an estimated cost to the taxpayer of at least £300,000.

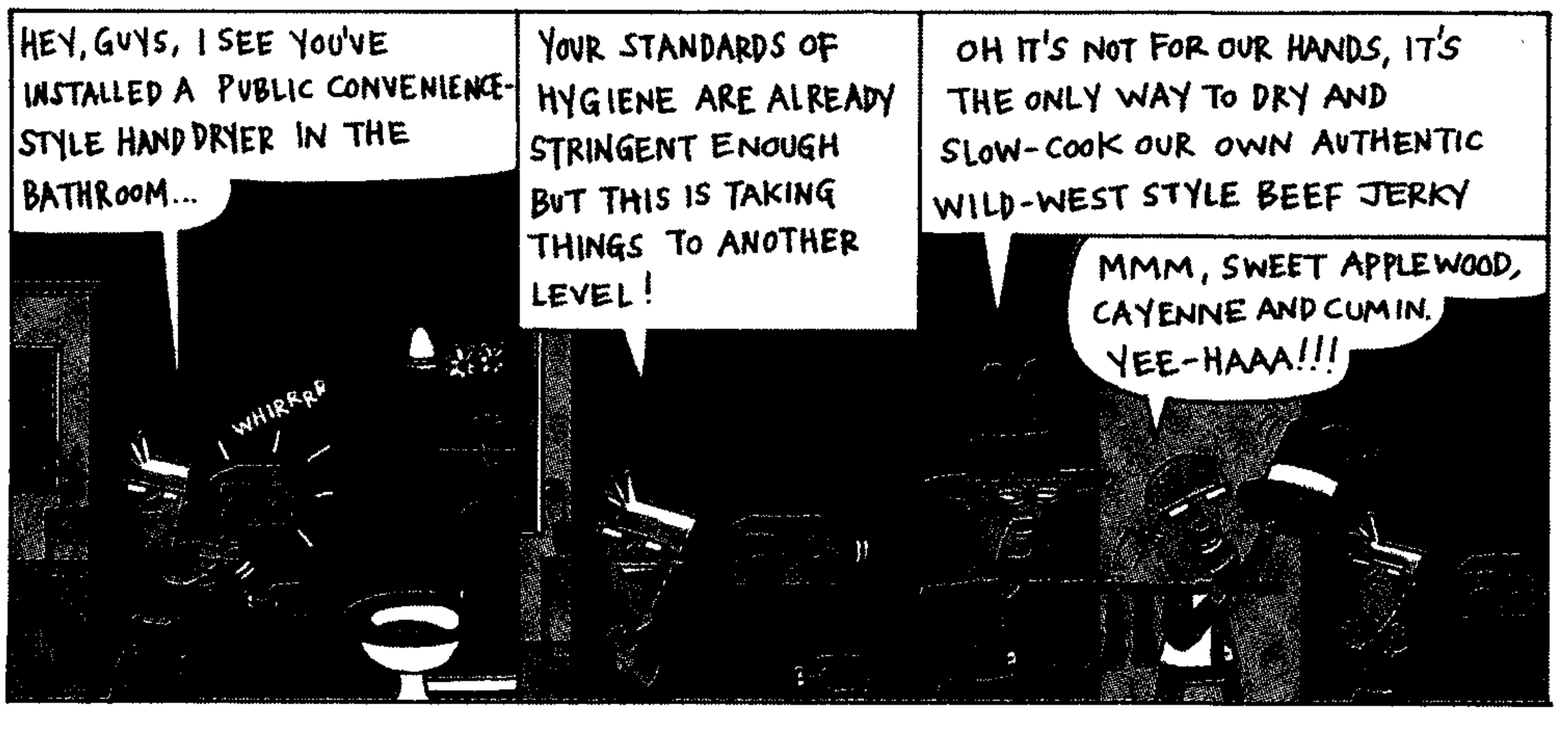
There followed two internal promotions to a new post of "head of paid services", both of whom took lucrative early retirements. The enhancement of one of these was estimated by councillors to have cost taxpayers £250,000. A third head of paid services, Mike Fisher, was eventually allowed to resurrect the title "chief executive", but after the return of the Tories last year his days were numbered and he has been "retired" early, with an undisclosed settlement. The poisoned chalice has now passed to legal services boss John Lawson while the council advertises for a permanent external replacement at £150,000 a year.

The rapidly revolving doors of County Hall have thus far cost taxpayer the thick end of three-quarters of a million quid in the past six years, over and above salaries – about the same amount per year that it would have cost to hire a second chief executive!

● A GLIMMER of good news from Rugby, where Persimmon's plans for 74 homes on the playing fields of Lawrence Sheriff School (*Eye* 1153) have been chucked out by the council.

Following an article in Eye 1153 which mentioned Doncaster Rovers Football Club, Mr John Ryan has asked us to make clear that although he is the owner and chairman of the club he does not own its Belle Vue stadium. We are happy to make the position clear and are sorry for any confusion arising out of the article.

IT'S GRIM UP NORTH LONDON KNIFE & PACKER


HEY, GUYS, I SEE YOU'VE INSTALLED A PUBLIC CONVENIENCE-STYLE HAND DRYER IN THE BATHROOM...
WHIRRRR
YOUR STANDARDS OF HYGIENE ARE ALREADY STRINGENT ENOUGH BUT THIS IS TAKING THINGS TO ANOTHER LEVEL!
OH IT'S NOT FOR OUR HANDS, IT'S THE ONLY WAY TO DRY AND SLOW-COOK OUR OWN AUTHENTIC WILD-WEST STYLE BEEF JERKY
MMM, SWEET APPLEWOOD, CAYENNE AND CUMIN. YEE-HAAA!!!

NOOKS and CORNERS

SOME PEOPLE never give up. In *Eyes* 1134 and 1143 I described how the Foreign Office Overseas Estates Group tried to lease St Helena's Chapel in the grounds of Pera House, our consulate in Istanbul, to a neighbouring hotel, to be converted into a club and bar.

This insulting proposal was eventually defeated through the mobilisation of opinion in Britain. But the group is now trying to dispose of a building known as the Architect's House, which is next to the Chapel and overlooks the consulate garden.

This is a three-storey red brick building with stone floors which once contained an arch for carriages to enter the embassy grounds and which served as the embassy chaplain's residence until 1928. It is now proposed to lease it for 49 years to a company called Orijin, which owns the multi-storey hotel rising nearby – even though the consulate is short of space in Pera. A tunnel will then be built under the Chapel Yard to link the site to the hotel, while the house itself will probably be demolished.

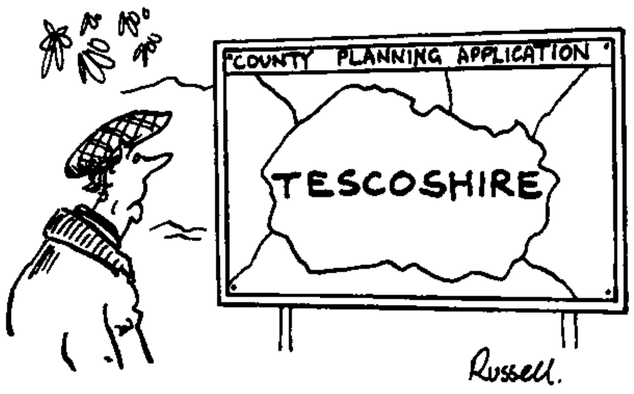
The house, like St Helena's Chapel and the handsome former embassy itself designed by Sir Charles Barry, was built on land originally granted for the purpose of housing Her Majesty's diplomatic mission to the Sublime Porte. It has always been understood that, should the land no longer be required for this purpose, it would be returned to the Turkish government – hence the local resentment over the St Helena's Chapel affair. At a time when Britain is hated throughout much of the world, our brilliant Foreign Office mandarins might reflect that trying to make money by illegally disposing of property in Istanbul isn't going to help matters. Incidentally, the company now building the hotel, Arab Holding, is also employed by the Foreign Office for its own developments in Istanbul and at the site of the old ambassador's summer residence at Tarabya.

OUR conservation-conscious government is always saying it wants to devolve more power to the regions – to anyone indeed, providing it concentrates more power to itself at the same time. The result is that while English Heritage, squeezed of funds by our respected Secretary of State for Culture, Tessa Jowell, is less and less able to do its statutory work of protecting the nation's architectural heritage, many local authorities do not employ a conservation officer and cannot be bothered to consult the amenity societies and others about planning applications involving listed buildings.

The fact is many local authorities simply regard conservation, conservation officers and such things as conservation areas advisory committees as nuisances which stand in the way of commercial development. A new wheeze is to do away with conservation areas advisory committees altogether. York City Council tried to do this, but failed. Now the East Riding of Yorkshire is having a go.

Conservation areas were first established under the 1967 Civic Amenities Act (gosh – by a Labour government: those were the days!) and soon after a government circular recommended the establishment of advisory committees. When properly established, these could work well as they relied on the expertise of local architects, historians and other interested volunteers. But, of course, such people tended to be unimpressed by crass and destructive developments within conservation areas.

After years of service, the members of the East Riding's conservation areas advisory committee have suddenly been told by the head of planning and development control, Philip Parker, that they are to be disbanded. "The council has been reviewing how to improve the quality of design advice in planning applications" – for which read: "how to speed up the planning process". The decision to disband "follows a lengthy consultation period" although, oddly, this was something the members managed to remain unaware of. Instead, there is to be a new Design Panel, although this has yet to be set up, let alone convened. This is apparently to consist of professionals – architects, planning consultants and the like – who will probably be paid. So, instead of having a committee of unpaid experts, who gave their time freely in the public interest, the council will now waste public money to secure the type of advice it thinks it needs – for we all know if you pay for advice you tend to get the advice you want.



So much for local democracy and public consultation. East Riding Council has followed the lead from Westminster and is establishing a smooth-running system to speed up development. This council, with its "cabinet" style of government based in Beverley, has appeared in this column several times before. There were the swaggering antics of its former chief executive, Darryl Stevenson and then its culpable failure to act against the owner who was neglecting Elmswell Old Hall, a listed 17th-century manor house (Eye 1044). Well, that promised repairs notice still has not been served to prevent the Old Hall falling further into dereliction. Why not? It is all too clear where, when it comes to the historic buildings and towns of the East Riding, the priorities of this wretched local authority lie.

'Piloti'

YOUNG BRITISH ARTISTS

BY BIRCH

BRITISH MUSEUM
MICHELANGELO DRAWINGS: CLOSER TO THE MASTER
23 MARCH TO 25 JUNE
I'm just amazed at all those elaborate preparatory studies for the Sistine chapel.
If he was that good, why couldn't he get it right first time?
Well, exactly!

MUSIC & MUSICIANS

THE Royal College of Organists (RCO) has suffered a "substantial deterioration" in its finances after an abortive move to Birmingham blew a £840,000 hole in its wallet.

The RCO has gone from a surplus in 2004 to a £839,994 deficit. During 2004-5 it spent £998,436 on relocation from London's Holborn, including travel costs, legal costs and the £559,003 "impairment loss" of pulling out of the building restoration project.

The collapse of the scheme to move into the grade I listed Curzon Street Station in Birmingham was reported in *Eye* 1145. The RCO's grandiose £8m plans, including a library, restaurant, 270-seat auditorium and a specially commissioned £750,000 organ from Switzerland, were mostly to be funded via Heritage Lottery cash, Birmingham City Council, Advantage West Midlands and European funds. The RCO had to find just £650,000; but in spring 2005 the trustees pulled out after realising that the building would not bring in a secure income and created "an unacceptable level of ongoing cost".

Having reached a peak of nine staff in 2004 under chief executive Alan Dear, the accounts show there are now seven and that £60,000 to £70,000 was received by "one former employee" (the aforesaid Mr Dear who departed during 2005).

Now there is even talk of the cash-strapped college moving out of its temporary home in Birmingham's Millennium Point development and shifting to just four home-workers running the college's core business: organising training and examinations for organists. What will they do with the rose tree planted at the Curzon Street site by the college patron, the Queen?

"Quite a good crowd in"

CRITIC Norman Lebrecht was very upset by ENO's announcement that Edward Gardner, 31-year old MD of Glyndebourne's touring company, was to be its new music director. No good will come of this, thundered Lebrecht in the *Evening Standard* – ignoring the fact that Gardner is one of the brightest young European opera conductors, with a dazzling track record and all the right credentials.

He was even more upset about the appointment of Jonathan Mills as director of the Edinburgh Festival. A "minnow", he ranted, thrashing around for any charge to lay against Mills – from being Australian, a "son of privilege" and "politically astute" to being "an innocent among panthers".

What Lebrecht didn't say was that Mills has been universally praised for his success running the Melbourne Festival, one of the biggest arts fixtures in the southern hemisphere; nor that his candidature for Edinburgh was supported by a powerfully persuasive alliance of Lord Harewood (who ran the festival and knows what it takes), Helena Kennedy QC and maverick Edinburgh impresario Richard Demarco who has been involved with the festival since it began.

To anyone in the know, Mills looks like an inspired choice and his supporters are refusing to be sucked into a scrap about it, which will annoy Lebrecht intensely. But not as much as Richard Demarco's comment when he was asked what he thought of Lebrecht's attack. "Lebrecht? I've never heard of him."

'Lunchtime O'Boulez'

Letters

May contain nuts

Sir,

Sir Nigel Crisp, Chief Executive of the NHS is being allowed to retire early. Perhaps the NHS will follow current medical advice and replace him with a lower fat snack.

SARAH DAWSON,

Newcastle Upon Tyne.

Blame culture

Sir,

MD is too right about NHS deficits (Eye 1154, p26). What's more, once you combine the government's "initiative-itis" and the Strategic Health Authorities' "Kiss up, kick down" culture, the only thing being devolved in the NHS is blame!

I understand that you can't resist a laugh at the Professor of Health Policy (yours truly) and his deficit. But please let me defend my Board. For six years we broke even. This year, we had predicted a large deficit due to the "three Ps" – Pay, Privatisation and PCTs!

I did not admit "that the Board should have asked more questions..." We were diligent about finance. Unfortunately, we were misled in Autumn 2005 on two fronts: We had always been stringent about getting the income that we were owed by PCTs and about cost improvement. On the former, pressure was brought to relax the stance, which we were not told about; on the latter, there was a temporary failure to build on our cost recovery programme (on which we had been congratulated by the SHA), despite our questions.

That said, if even now the University Hospital of North Staffordshire were paid properly for patients seen, its deficit would be close to our original prediction.

I guess you'd prefer the Prof who can't add two and two to an anorak, so I'd better shut up!

Yours,

CALUM PATON,

Keele University.

Prophet motive

Sir,

It's not quite true that the "Animated World Faiths" film on The Life of Muhammad (pbuh)" has never caused offence.

When it was first broadcast in Welsh on S4C (prior to the C4 transmission), various powers that be in the non-Welsh speaking Islamic community (none of whom had seen or heard it) assumed that it must be the mother of all blasphemies and messages were sent out to imams that Friday prayers should contain warnings against viewing it, and children kept back from school. It was a schools programme.

In the ensuing furore we agreed to rewrite and record the one speech given to Muhammad (who was never seen) as narration. This, despite the fact that the feature film "The Message" has Muhammad speaking. We also got back one of the all-Muslim cast to pronounce Musslim instead of Muzlim.

But this didn't prevent mutterings of fatwas, a telephoned bomb threat to Channel 4's HQ and enough all-round unease for both the director and writer to ask for their names to be removed from the credits.

When C4 did broadcast it the only calls were of congratulation.

Yours animatedly faithfully,

MARTIN LAMB,

Series Editor, Animated World Faiths.

Satanist reality

Sir,

I was dismayed to see that Private Eye has joined the ranks of the False Memory lobby regarding the subject of child abuse – and, in particular, Satanist ritual abuse (SRA), which is not synonymous with ritual abuse (Satanic Panic, Eye 1153).

As co-ordinator of the organisation RAINS (Ritual Abuse Information Network & Support), I have no doubt whatsoever that Satanist abuse is a reality. I believe it to be far more prevalent than I thought 20 years ago, when I first encountered it. Since then, I have talked to more than 600 professionals who have worked with victims/survivors. I have also spoken with over 200 victims and have done intensive work with many of them. Although they do not know each other, they all describe very similar activities. In addition, I regularly receive threatening letters, phone calls and text messages from self-declared Satanists, telling me to back off.

The 1994 government report, which was dismissive of the reality, has been heavily criticised by many professionals (see "The Politics & Experience of Ritual Abuse" by Sara Scott, 2001).

The attack on Sarah Nelson was unjustified and uncalled for. She has written many articles exposing the subject of SRA and much of her work has been backed up by research. I have not yet read the booklet to which your article refers, but I can assure you that the mental health problems mentioned are highly characteristic of those seen in survivors of child abuse; even more so of SRA victims.

Yours,

DR JOAN COLEMAN, MRCPSYCH.

RAINS Co-ordinator.

Lookalike

Thomas

Daffyd

Sir,

The famous poet, piss artist and player of the pink oboe Dylan Thomas, has a close resemblance to The Only Gay In The Village, Daffyd. Is there any chance of them being related? (No doubt, Dylan would say Llareggub.)

Regards,

DAVE ALEXANDER,

Swansea.

Zip it

Sir,

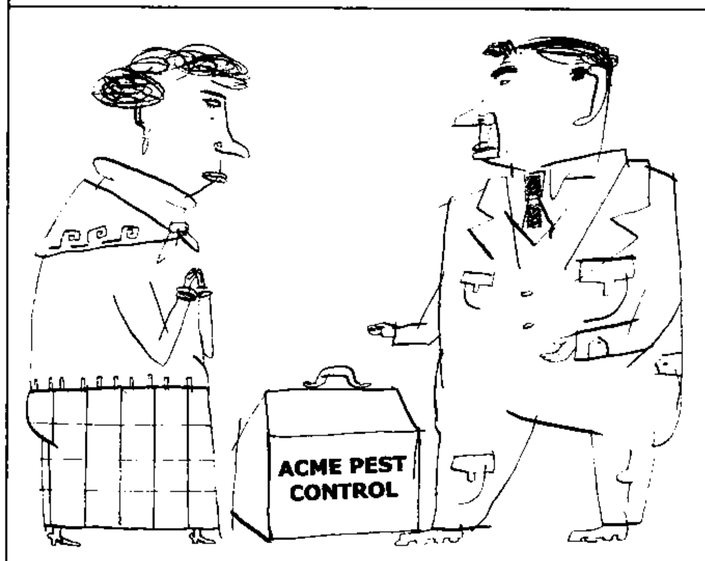
In a bid to write the saddest letter ever to your organ, may I point out that RR, who drew the cartoon on page 19 of issue 1154 clearly didn't do his/her maths homework on symmetry when at school, as one of the outlines of Great Britain in the tree felled by the lumberjack should be the mirror image of the other. Of course, there is the possibility that the tree trunk, whilst falling, was rotated through four-dimensional space, which would allow both ends to have their cross-sections the same way round, but how likely is that?

Yours, snug in my anorak,

NICK WRAY,

Derby.

Scenes You Seldom See



"Mice are harmless and very intelligent. Why don't you just try getting used to them?"

Pipped

Sir,

Re: your feature "Eye Told You So", p4, Eye 1154, on toxic fumes in passenger aircraft – actually, I told you so, with my front-page exclusive for the Independent on Sunday, "Passengers at risk as fumes make pilots black out", way back in December 1998. Keep up the good work!

Toodle-pip,

JAKE LYNCH,

Via email.

Living in the past

Sir,

With reference to Piloti's latest rage against the good vicar of Talham (Norfolk Broads) 3.3.06. How absurd it is that the dear old Church of England should want to connect with the commercial centre of town! Fancy even wanting to create a "welcoming area" for the people of the town as they attend the church! What is the world coming to... a church that wants to be part of the 21st century... a vicar who wants to spend a few thousand pounds to ensure that the church stays in touch with the world?

The real vandalism Mr Piloti, would be not making the most of the Christian heritage of care and concern accrued across the centuries. Thankfully, in this instance it's not the church living in the past but sadly, yourself.

IAN LOVETT,

Merseyside.

Pedant's Corner

Sir,

I'm sure I won't be the only person to try to out-pedant Julian Thake (Eye 1154). But he is wrong to suggest that Clive Digger is groping for the world "climax" to describe the top point of a crescendo.

"Climax" is derived from the Greek word for "ladder", and its original English usage was to describe a rhetorical device consisting of a series of statements, each stronger than the last. Its everyday meaning is thus precisely the same as "crescendo". Admittedly, it has been "misused" (to quote the Oxford English Dictionary) to denote the last term of a rhetorical climax, for 150 years. But that is no argument either for or against misusing the word "crescendo" in the same way.

Yours,

PETER JOHNSTONE,

St John's College, Cambridge.

All of the patients who took part in the three-month trial had previously had a number of treatments, including ultraviolent radiation therapy.

Newcastle Journal

Those green lane letters in full...

Sir,

I'm a bit puzzled by Muckspreader's "Down On The Farm" piece (Eye 1154) as it has nothing to do with farming.

Straying outside his area of expertise has caused Muckspreader to get in a terrible mess: vehicles are not barred from RUPPS, indeed if a right of way has RUPP status then the chances are greater than 80 percent that it is a carriageway which is open to motor vehicles, and has probably been used by them for both recreational and agricultural purposes for the best part of a century.

Wiltshire County Council will have examined the historic documentary evidence before deciding on the status of this right of way, as they are obliged to by law.

If the locals were honest, they would probably admit that this particular lane may well already be being used by members of the Trail Riders Fellowship.

But, as the TRF operates a code of conduct aimed at minimising any impact which their activities have on the environment and other countryside users, it may well be that their activities have passed unnoticed.

Local residents should be reassured that reclassifying "their" RUPP as a BOAT will not change anything. It merely confirms the status of the lane as being open to wheeled vehicles (and incidentally prevents it from being destroyed by property developers or intensive farming).

Those who wish to walk in the countryside without encountering motorised users may do so on the 95 percent of rights of way (footpaths and bridleways) which are not open to vehicles. They also have all the right-to-roam land. In my experience many walkers tend to use RUPPs and BOATS in preference to overgrown and difficult to trace footpaths and bridleways simply because the passage of the odd motor vehicle or two actually helps to define the way.

RICHARD SIMPSON,

Gloucester.

...I feel it is rather pertinent to the subject of the article that the reclassification of all RUPPs is a statutory duty placed upon all local authorities in the 1968 Countryside Act. Most LAs have so woefully failed to meet this legal requirement that unpaid volunteers such as Bill Riley have had to step into the breach to do their work for them.

GEOFF CAMPBELL,

Llangynog, Carmarthen.

...The reason for the close relationship between the Trail Riders Fellowship (no I'm not a member) and the local authority is simple. The TRF aims to use byways legally and responsibly, and the only way to determine the legal status of a green lane is to go to the council office, and see the rights of way officer who will show you the definitive maps, therefore they tend to know each other. The second reason is that when the rights of way officer makes a decision on the re-grading of a RUPP they must take into account the history of vehicular use, including for instance whether historically, horse-drawn carriages were used on the road. The TRF helps in researching the past use of the historic rights of way and may pass the information on to the rights of way officers. For these reasons there is a degree of co-operation between the two groups, which is to be applauded.

The TRF are a bunch of old codgers who like to ride on unsurfaced roads. It's the nutters from the local council estate (sorry, housing association social housing and community well-being project) on motocross bikes that ride across any bit of land and don't give a shit about rights of ways that you want to worry about.

A.J. PICKNETT,

Via email.

• Thanks for the large number of similar letters. Ed.

Bum notes

SEXTOUR

POUR PIANO, FLUTE, HAUTBOIS, CLARINETTE, BASSON ET COR

Sir,

Re: Funny Old World (Eye 1153) and Cat Letter (Eye 1154).

With reference to misprints on the covers of music editions, here is a genuine error dating from 1945. The publisher was Wilhelm Hansen in Copenhagen. The dedicatee of this work was Georges Salles (1889-1966), the grandson of Gustav Eiffel (builder of the tower), and president of the International Council of Museums 1953-9, who devoted his life to the study of oriental art, to museums and humanism. Poulenc wrote a motet Exultate Deo (1941) to celebrate Salles' marriage, but the marriage never took place.

Yours faithfully,
MICHAEL BRYANT,

Via email.

Lookalike

Allen

Kissinger

Sir,

What can one say?

ANTON VAN DER BAAN,

Via email.

Head line here

Sir,

I was surprised to see that "He just needs to screw his loaf" qualifies as a Colemanball (Eye 1154). Long-term prisoners with whom I worked in the 1970s used it interchangeably with "screw your bin" to mean "use your head".

Your contributor clearly did not mix in the right circles. Can I have his £10?

Yours faithfully,
PETER QUINN (FORMER PRISON GOVERNOR),

Helperby, N. Yorks.

Colemanballs

£10 paid for contributions

"Meanwhile, it's Birmingham nil, Spurs nil: that one will be kicking off in a couple of hours."

Talk Sport Radio
(Michael Charalambous)

"Every Celtic player will wear the number seven jersey on his shorts."

MURDO MacLEOD, Radio Scotland
(N. MacDonald)

"Well, the proof of the pudding is at the end of the day."

GEOFFREY BOYCOTT, Radio 4
(Peter Bracken)

"For all their possession, Preston have only had one shot on target, and that was off target."

JOHN PEARSON, BBC Radio Sheffield
(David Moran)

"Glen Roeder will think for a few minutes before making a rash decision."

STEVE STONE, Radio 5 Live
(Graeme Neill)

SOLUTIONS

"Carestream Radiology Solutions" – *x-rays*

"Bentley Cleaning Solutions" – *mops*

"Docking Solutions" – *jetty cleats*

"Fluidmaster: Modern Toilet Solutions" – *cisterns*

"ELG Haniel Group: Stainless Steel Solutions" – *scrap metal*

"Integrated Vegetable Supply Solutions" – *greengrocers*

All submitted by readers

Only natural

Sir,

Square Eyes does need to pay a little more attention. The BBC Natural History Unit have been making 50 minutes shows, bundling them up with a DVD extra "Making of" segment and running them for a full hour for years now. The practice certainly dates back to 2001.

This is plainly not cheapskate production on their part, but quite a sensible way of making the hour-long show we expect and getting a 50-minute show that can be sold to other networks that run advertising.

NICK EDEN,

Via email.

Vagina monologue

Sir,

Your article "High Principals" (1154), was admirable in its attempt to explore the decision by Sussex University to close its chemistry department. However, your attack on V-Day and Minority Week was mean-spirited and ill-informed.

A quick internet search would have uncovered the fact that V-Day is a global movement to stop violence against women and girls by raising money and awareness for anti-violence initiatives. An admirable cause I am sure you would agree.

Yours faithfully,
KATE HAWKINS,

Brighton, E. Sussex.

Needled

Sir,

Ken Holmes (Letters, Eye 1154) seems to imply that the decision of the 1920s dairy industry to cull their livestock justifies the lack of vaccinations provided by the government in the present day. By this logic, all post-1929 medical advances should be ended forthwith, because in the 1920s we chose not to have them. Let's put on a gramophone and do the Charleston.

Yours faithfully,
JOHN REYNOLDS,

Via email.

Yours offended

Sir,

After reading your rag/mag for many years I was finally offended by two items in Eye 1154: the "Court Circular" about the president of Brazil and the cartoon of John Profumo's grave.

Yours,
FIN WEBSTER,

Newbury, Berks.

Letter from **Panama**

from Our Own Correspondent

WHEN the Republic of Panama assumed full control of the Panama Canal on 1 January 2000, there were widespread mutterings that a bunch of corrupt, work-shy dagos were not up to the task of running one of the world's most important waterways.

The doubters have been proved wrong. For the last six years the canal has functioned more reliably and efficiently than at any time in its history. So it's distressing to see it now slipping into a state of potentially terminal decline, largely as a result of a crass political misjudgement by our president.

"There's more to Panama than the canal." The stock travel literature cliché is true to a point. We sell quite a number of bananas. Our banks are a haven for money-laundering and other murky "offshore finance" activities. And we have emerged as an important hub for Latin American gangs smuggling drugs and immigrants into the US. The canal, however, remains our most valuable asset and the only national symbol in which we can take any real pride.

When Martin Torrijos ran for president in 2004 he exploited popular pride in the canal and the iconic status of his late father, the former military dictator General Omar Torrijos. Omar, who negotiated the canal handover with President Jimmy Carter in 1977, was elevated to the status of national martyr-in-chief following his death in a mysterious plane crash in 1981. Martin thus deployed his Omar/canal double whammy during the 2004 campaign when he promised that, should he win, he would put a decision on whether to go ahead with a major expansion of the canal to a referendum.

It has been clear for some years that drastic measures will have to be taken to prevent the canal declining into irrelevance. A new generation of tankers and container vessels is too wide to fit through the nearly 100-year-old lock system and the proportion of maritime traffic using the canal is falling by the year.

A year ago, the Panama Canal Authority was preparing to recommend the construction of a new set of locks, and Martin Torrijos would have taken the proposal to an adoring electorate, secured approval and begun courting foreign investors with a view to starting work in 2007. But things didn't go to plan. First Torrijos picked a fight with public sector unions over pension reform plans, resulting in a series of strikes and a dramatic collapse in his popularity. Then rumours began to circulate about the details of the mooted canal enlargement. The project will require the flooding of large areas of agricultural land in the interior. The supply of drinking water to Panama City, which is served from the canal's Gatun Lake reservoir, will be jeopardized. And to fund the enlargement, the canal will be sold to the Chinese government!

The canal authority, sticking to the official line that no decisions have been reached on engineering or funding, is powerless to refute the rumours. Torrijos meanwhile has issued assurances that no village will be flooded and no foreign nation will be allowed to dominate the canal, thereby undermining the canal authority's position that everything is yet to be decided.

Panamanians smell a rat and popular support for the project is falling by the day. When Ferdinand de Lesseps began the first serious attempt to construct a Panama Canal in 1881, he set in motion an epic fiasco that claimed tens of thousands of lives, ruined grand reputations and contributed to the collapse of a French government before succumbing to bankruptcy in 1889. Hence the French coined the phrase "quel Panama!" to describe a hopeless mess. Torrijos is no de Lesseps. But he is making a right Panama of the canal.

FUNNY OLD WORLD

COMPILED BY **VICTOR LEWIS-SMITH**

"Aqua-Fire is perfectly safe," Karen Chu of the Life of Life Healing Spa told reporters in Hong Kong, "because most of your skin is protected from the flames by wet towels. We have no accidents, no burns, none that I know of anyway. Asian people understand the idea of fire as a healing treatment, it's only Westerners who are afraid. When I first explain to them what will happen, they always ask 'Are you going to barbecue me?' and some even try to run away when I reply 'yes'. Last week, someone was so scared she uncontrollably went to the toilet in front of me."

Chu was demonstrating her clinic's Aqua-Fire weight loss treatment, in which patients are doused with alcohol and herbs before being set on fire, for $150 a session. "The process literally burns centimetres of unwanted fat from your body. People can lose up to 15 cms of fat in a single 90-minute session. First you lie naked on your back, while we scrub and pummel your fatty areas and baste you with herbs. Then we wrap you in cellophane, cover you with a towel, then douse you with alcohol and set fire to you. When the heat becomes unbearable, usually after about a minute and half, you signal to us and we extinguish the flames. Then we repeat the burning several times, until all your unwanted fat has simply melted away. Where does the fat go? It drains out via your lymphatic system. That's the beauty of Aqua-Fire." *(South Asia News, 30/1/06. Spotter: Brendan Joseph O'Byrne)*

– o –

"David Galvan and his uncle Rafael Vargas were sharing drinks on Sunday night with their neighbours," a spokesman for the Colombian police told a press conference in Barranquilla, "when David developed hiccups. He tried holding his breath and drinking out of the wrong side of the glass, but the hiccups wouldn't stop, so Rafael said he would try an old family remedy by scaring him. Rafael worked as a security guard and always carried a loaded revolver with him, so he suddenly pulled it out of its holster and pointed it at David's neck, hoping to frighten him and stop the hiccups. Unfortunately the gun went off as he did so, shooting David in the neck and killing him instantly. When he realised what had happened, Rafael was so distraught that he immediately turned the gun on himself and committed suicide. At that point, the neighbours thought it best to go home. But they called us next morning to tell us what happened, which was when we broke in and found the bodies." (Daily News [Zambia], 26/1/06. Spotter Brian Rowlands)

– o –

"It's only the business leaders who don't want a goat as mayor, and they're wrong," Nancy Ross told reporters in Anza, California. "Opie is the reason why so many people have moved out here, he's been good for the town. He was democratically elected in 2003, and he beat three human candidates when he was voted into office. He's raised a lot of money for charity, and he attracts a lot of visitors to the town, so why does he have to resign? Local businessmen say he gives Anza a bad image, but most of us would rather have a goat ruling over us than some human sitting on a throne."

Although Opie the goat was forced out of office last year (following a vote of no

confidence by the Anza Valley Chamber of Commerce), many other American towns still have democratically elected animals as mayors. "We decided to have a little truth in politics by only allowing jackasses to run," said Celinda Kaelin of Florissant, Colorado, "which is how Paco Bell the donkey became our mayor. Down in Abilene, Texas, their mayor is a dog called Devlin, and over in Lajitas, Texas, another goat called Clay Henry II was elected mayor. He'd been castrated after drinking a man's beer and I guess the townspeople felt sorry for him. He won a landslide victory on a campaign slogan of 'I Want Beer For Lajitas'." *(Sunday Tribune [California], 11/12/05. Spotter: Michael Allwright)*

ST ALBION PARISH NEWS

Incumbent: Rev A.R.P. Blair MA (Oxon)

Hullo!

Or should I say "Goodbye" – because I know that's what some of you want to hear me say!

No names, but I am sure the entire parish will know who I am referring to – ie them!

Well, by way of an answer, can I just quote those immortal words from the Good Book, 'no way, Hosé' (*Book of Hosé-a, 4.16*).

No, this storm in a teacup, which is all it is, frankly, has been blown up out of all proportion by a tiny minority of a few hundred thousand misguided individuals whose sole aim in life is to stir up trouble and make life difficult for the vicar!

What they're saying is that I've secretly been lent money – small sums of millions of pounds – by a number of charitably-disposed local businessmen, whose only aim is to further the work I've been trying to do in the parish (with very little thanks, I might say!).

And yet their names have been dragged through the mud and gossiped about in the Britannia Arms, just as if they were common criminals who were only in it for themselves!

Honestly! Let's look at these people, shall we?

- Mr Gulag Loon, proprietor of the New Mumbai Star Curry House in the High Street (Balti and Tandoori dishes a speciality).
- Dr Bakhanda Patel, proprietor of our much-admired Farewell Home For The Elderly, in Laburnum Crescent.
- Mr Rob Allbust, who runs "Mr Megabyte", the computer repair shop next to Tesco and opposite the other Tesco (just before you get to the Tesco Metro Corner Shop, but not as far as our new out-of-town Tesco Supastore).
- Mr Barry Townspiv, our much-respected independent financial adviser,

"Who will sling the first mud?" The old biblical text as seen by local artist Mr de la Nougerede.

who runs the Fillyerbootz One-Stop-Stock-Shop from above the chip shop.

I could go on! But who could read this list of some of the most distinguished wealth-creators in the parish without coming to the conclusion that you could not want a straighter bunch of guys, whose only concern is to serve the needs of our St Albion's community in any way they can?

Let's look again, for example, at the contribution of Mr Loon.

Who amongst us has not waited patiently at the counter for one of his delicious chicken tikka massala takeaways, with extra pappadums and a carton of cucumber raita?

This is the kind of man we're talking about here, a real pillar of the community!

Or consider Mr Patel, whose only aim is to help our old folk to die with dignity as quickly and painlessly as possible. What more admirable contribution could anyone make to the life of our parish?

And Mr Townspiv, giving his time to advising young and old alike on the best way to maximise their hard-earned savings by investing in the mysterious world of the Stock Market.

As it happens, I know all these men myself, because I was introduced to them at the St Albion's Tennis Club by my friend Mr Levy who, as you know, has been my tennis partner for many years.

And if these generous guys want to lend a few bob to help me out in my mission here in St Albion's, then surely it's no one's business except theirs?

Hey, *I've* got nothing to hide – but *they* didn't want everyone to know how generous they'd been, because they are so modest!

So naturally, I didn't go round shouting about it to people like Mr Brown, Mr Prescott and Mr Dromey, our parish book-keeper.

I'm not saying they can't be trusted! But I couldn't be absolutely sure that they wouldn't go around the parish blabbing their mouths off and pretending there was something dodgy about my borrowing all this money on the quiet from men who run curry houses and computer shops!

So there we are! I did nothing wrong and nor did anybody else – except Mr Brown, Mr Prescott and Mr Dromey, obviously!

But then that's the kind of betrayal I've come to expect in this job. It goes with the territory!

And just in case some of you are still concerned about what has happened, let me assure you that every penny I've borrowed will be carefully accounted for, and that our whole system of financing the parish will be completely reformed, root and branch, so that none of these disgraceful things can ever happen again!

As for these so-called businessmen, who have been trying to use their ill-gotten gains to "curry favour" (got it, Mr Loon?) and win influence in the parish, let me make it clear that they will not be getting any favours from me, and they certainly won't be getting any of their money back, because we've spent it all on our exciting campaign putting up a poster in the Tesco car park with the brilliant slogan "Support Your Vicar – We Know Where You Live".

Yours in the red *(surely "the Lord"? Ed.)*

Tony

To Remember In Your Prayers

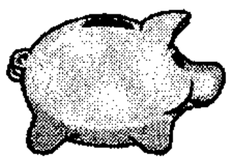
- Mr and Mrs Dromey (better known to us all as Mrs Harman and her ghastly 'partner' who used to have a beard). In the light of Mr Dromey's recent unfortunate outburst about the vicar, let us pray that Harriet will have the wisdom to follow the fine moral example set by Mrs Jowell and will arrange for her marriage to break down as soon as possible. T.B.

Welcome!

We are much looking forward to this Sunday's Evening Service, which will be taken by Mr Straw's sister, Suzy Shaw (known as "Cloud Dancer"), who is the High Priestess of our local Gaian Fellowship. Suzy will lead the congregation in a celebration of healing, dance and "hot stone rituals", and parishioners are asked to come in loose-fitting clothes and sandals.

Mr Straw writes: ***This is nothing to do with me, and sadly I shall be unable to attend, owing to the fact that I shall be on a mission to Iraq where, despite the civil war, everything is going extremely well.***

WE'RE SORRY!



The Parish Accounts

We're sorry, but there just isn't enough room to print Mr Brown the Treasurer's report in full. Suffice it to say, that contrary to all the nonsense that everybody is talking around the parish, his handling of the finances has in no way been exceptional, brilliant or marvellous. Also, his presentation in front of the PCC was, to be honest, a little embarrassing. Those awful jokes! That terrible tie! No offence, Gordon, but as they say in the European Song Contest, "Nul points" from the vicarage!

I mean, since when have you been interested in sport, Gordon, or indeed any form of exercise? (No offence, mate, but you could lose a few pounds and I don't mean the type that keep disappearing in the parish accounts!)

Look, there isn't space, as I said, to go on and on about this, but all that long-winded guff about education. Yes, we know you've suddenly got children, Gordon. Yawn! So, where did you get that idea then...?! The same place you got the drinking-tea-all-the-time idea!!! ie, ME AGAIN!!

So, if you seriously want to be vicar one day, Gordon, you really will have to try a great deal harder. I'm not going to use the word "lacklustre" about your performance because, to be honest, it wasn't that good.

● For a full point-by-point analysis of Mr Brown's presentation, go to the vicar's blog at www.revblog.co.uk

This Week's 'Words of Comfort'

"It is easier for a rich man to enter the kingdom than a poor man, because he's got more money." *St Luke Johnson, 7.23*

"It is better to lend than to give, because then it doesn't show up on the accounts." *Book of Levy, 12.1*

"Blessed are the rich, for they shall dwell in the House of the Lords forever." *Book of Prophet Margin, 14.16*

OOPS!!

When, in an interview last year on St Albion's Cottage Hospital Radio, I said that I was considering retirement, many of you may have got the impression that I was considering retirement.

Well, hey – here's a first – and I'm big enough to admit it – I may have been wrong!?!!

Of course what I meant was that Gordon is going to retire soon and that I shall be here serving you as your Vicar for all eternity – "I am with you always." (Book of Common Errors 1599 – or 1399 in the Vestry Bookshop!) T.B.

Estate Agent Documentary Row

by Our Under-Offer Reporter **Christopher House-Price**

A CONTROVERSIAL BBC documentary screened last night provoked complaints from a number of leading crooks who are furious at being compared to estate agents.

Cunning As A Foxton

Said one, "To equate crooks like myself with estate agents is terribly unjust.

"Not all crooks," he continued, "behave like estate agents. Most of us are decent, hard-working criminals, providing the public with a valuable service – ie, removing their property while they are not there."

He concluded, as he drove off in his trademark getaway car, "We have a code of bad conduct which we abide by and, whilst a tiny minority of rotten apples might be guilty of turning to estate agency, we should not all be tarred with the same brush. These wild generalisations are little short of libellous and *(cont. p. 94)*

● **Don't miss the BBC's next incredible documentary – *Used Car Dealers: Are They Not Really As Lovable And Trustworthy As They Seem To Be?***

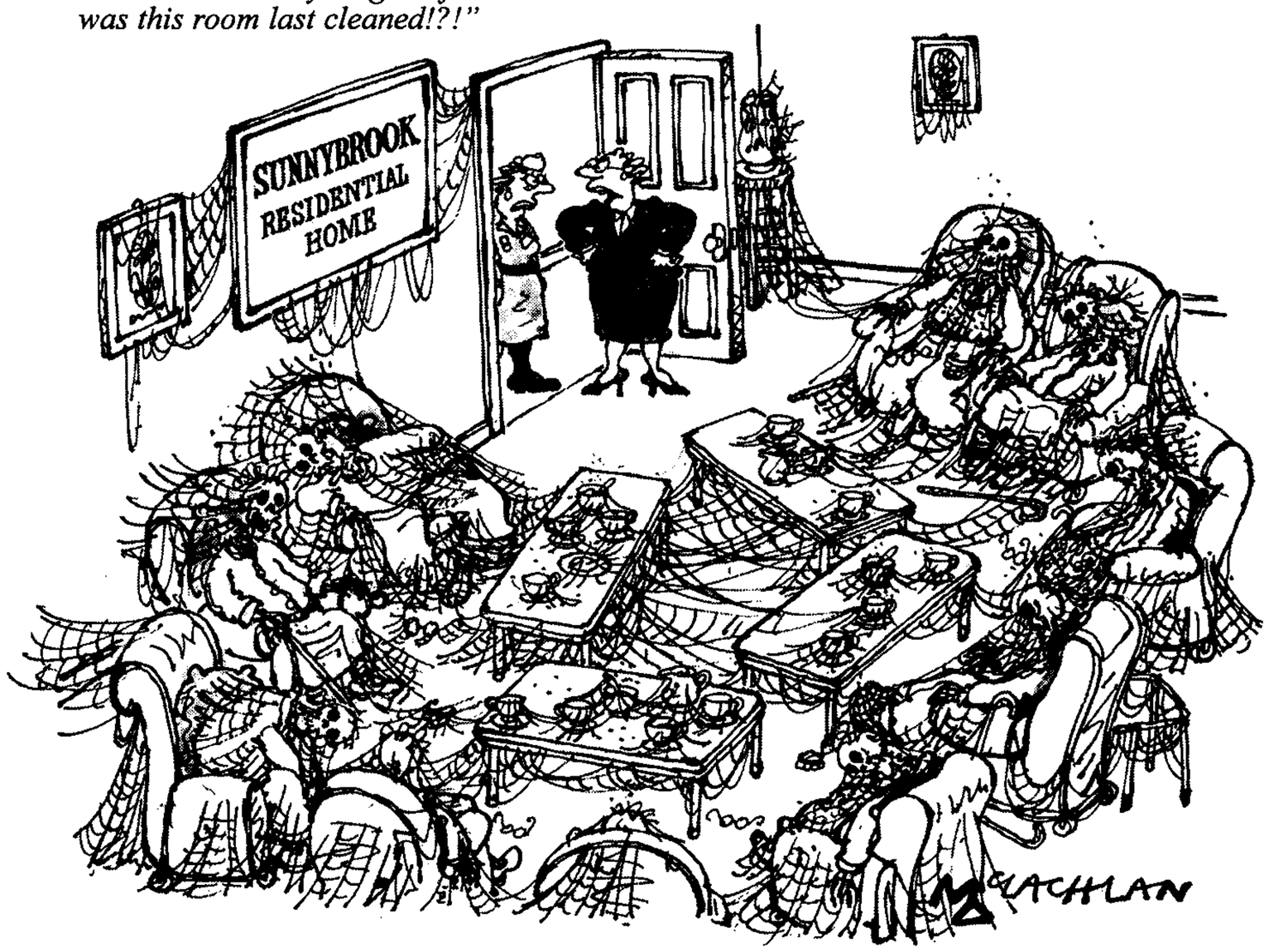
The England Cricket Team
Another Apology

IN RECENT WEEKS, in common with all other newspapers, we may have given the impression that the England cricket team, following the departures of Michael Vaughan, Marcus Trescothick and other leading players, were in some way completely useless and were about to be humiliated by their vastly superior Indian opponents. Headlines such as "Freddie's Flops Fail Again", "The Flintoff Farce Touches New Low" and "Why Don't You Top Yourselves, You Bunch Of Losers?" may have led readers to believe that we had very little confidence in Mr Flintoff and his team.

We now accept that there was not a jot or scintilla of truth whatsoever in these wholly baseless and inaccurate innuendos, and that, following their 212-run victory at Mumbai (formerly Calcutta), we would like to make it clear that Mr Flintoff is a superhuman figure who now towers over the world cricketing scene, while his colleagues are scarcely less distinguished in their prodigious talent, and that the very least the Prime Minister can do when they return home is to give them all peerages.

© *All newspapers 2006.*

"This is absolutely disgraceful! – When was this room last cleaned!?!"



WATER COMPANIES FEAR 'EXCUSES ARE DRYING UP'

by Our Science Editor **Jonathan Leak**

THE major water companies were warning customers last night that they faced "a major shortage of excuses" in the coming months.

In an official statement issued by the big waterless companies, they admit, "We face an unprecedented drought of credible reasons why we have failed to do the job we are paid to do.

No Way Hose Pipe

"For too long we have been spraying around excuses, like seasonal variation, global warming and customers wanting to use water all the time."

A spokesman confirmed that in the near future the companies would be so barren of excuses that they would have to resort to drastic measures, ie telling the truth.

"If it comes to it," said a spokesman, "we're going to put a nationwide ban on using excuses and admit that we've got leaky old pipes, we've sold off the reservoirs to housing developers and we've failed to invest in logistical systems to transport water from one area to another."

WEMBLEY STADIUM 'ON TARGET'

by Our Construction Correspondent **Jerry Built**

MULTIPLEX, the construction company building Wembley Stadium, insists that, despite setbacks, the stadium is still on schedule to replace the Millennium Dome as the country's leading white elephant.

"While we were obviously disappointed that only a small section of the roof caved in this week, resulting in only a day's delay to the project," said the firm's chairman, "we still have every confidence that once the stadium finally opens in 2003 it will be an elephant of such whiteness it will be an elephant by which all other white elephants are judged."

Multiplex has strongly rejected claims by workers on site saying that "some work is getting done this week", saying that these were scurrilous rumours and that the workers involved had all been killed.

Late News

FA officials have announced that, following this week's incident where a section of the new Wembley Stadium's roof collapsed, all future FA Cup Finals will now be played in the Diana Memorial.

"Not only is the Diana Memorial a far safer venue, but it's also far more likely to re-open on time than Wembley ever will," said *(cont. p. 94)*

THE UK PRESS GAZETTE AWARDS

WHO were the big winners in Fleet Street's answer to the Oscars? Who best embodied the spirit of journalistic integrity in the newspaper world of 2006?

Those Winners in Full

■ **Best former editor sacked for faking photographs but not for share-tipping**

PIERS MORON
(proprietor of the *UK Press Gazette*)

■ **Best PR man married to Mr Murdoch's daughter**

MATTHEW FRAUD
(proprietor of the *UK Press Gazette*)

■ **Worst press award ceremony**

PIERS MORON AND MATTHEW FRAUD'S *'THE UK PRESS GAZETTE AWARDS 2006'*

RESULTS

RACING

THE CHELTENHAM GLUE CUP

French Restaurant Steaks (3.30)

1 **BOSTIK BOY** (J. Prittstik 5-4f) ; 2 **Meaty Chunks Lad** (5-2) ; 3 **Dead Rum** (8-1).

Going: Goner ***(That's enough. Ed)***

MODERN NURSERY RHYMES

Mary had a little lamb
It and she were buddies
It followed her to school
and got
An A in media studies

TV HIGH-LIGHTS

The Harold Wilson Conspiracy

BBC, Monday 9.00pm

DOCUDRAMA reconstructing the events of a week ago when all the TV networks mysteriously decided to put on programmes about Harold Wilson.

Harold Wilson Programmes remembered

ITV, Tuesday 10.00pm

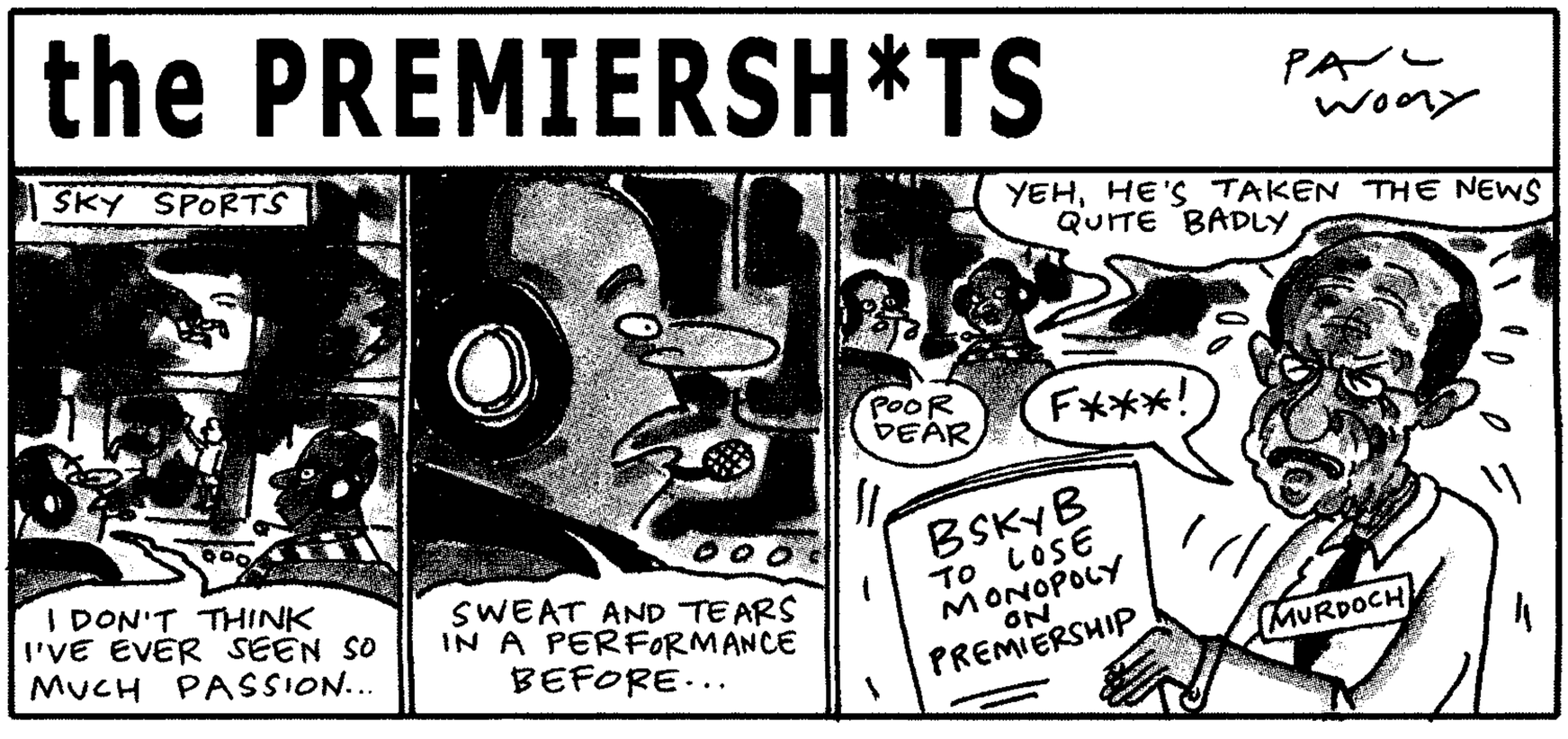
A FOND look back at the heady days of last week's Harold Wilson programmes using archive footage and eye witnesses who sat through all the programmes reconstructing the events.

Lavender Listings

BBC3, Wednesday 9.00pm

FACUTAINMENT playlet examining the curious tale of how hundreds of programmes about Harold Wilson and Marcia Falkender made it onto the TV schedules at exactly the same time. Starring James Bolam as Francis Wheen and Harold Wilson as Kenneth Williams. *(That's enough Wilson programmes. Ed.)*

the PREMIERSH*TS


PAUL WOOLY
SKY SPORTS
I DON'T THINK I'VE EVER SEEN SO MUCH PASSION...
SWEAT AND TEARS IN A PERFORMANCE BEFORE...
YEH, HE'S TAKEN THE NEWS QUITE BADLY
POOR DEAR
F***!
BSKYB TO LOSE MONOPOLY ON PREMIERSHIP
MURDOCH

THE NAIVE IDIOT WHO WENT TO IRAQ

by Our Defence Staff BAZRA BAGHDADIBOY

HE WAS told not to go, but he defied his friends and advisers and went anyway. He claimed to have a mission to bring peace to the troubled land of Iraq. He even claimed that God had told him to go.

But of course the inevitable happened. He immediately got into trouble and Iraqi militants targeted his peace mission.

Shocking And Awful

Army generals were particularly scathing about what they called "this reckless and silly adventure".

Said Sir Michael Jackson, "We in the armed forces have better things to do than rescue some foolhardy idealist who brings disaster on himself."

The General continued: "And he's not even grateful. The taxpayer has spent millions of pounds trying to extricate this deluded fool from Iraq and he doesn't even say thank you."

However, the man at the centre of the storm remains unrepentant. "I would go in again," he said. "I have a deep faith in myself and I believe that war is the only solution to the problems of peace-torn Iraq."

Norman Kember is 94.

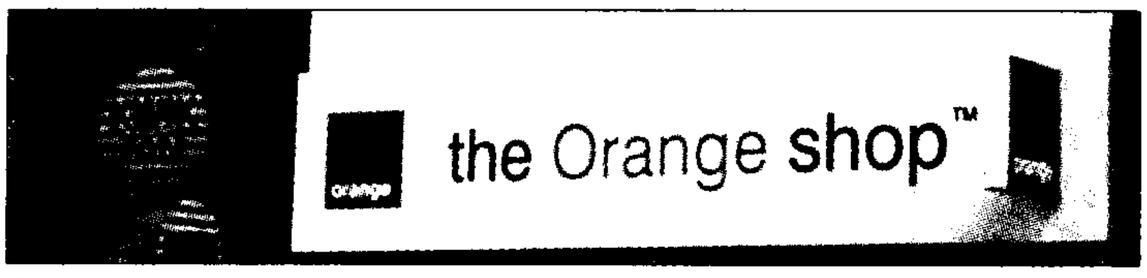
Red Ken's Kwik Guide To The Middle East

(approved for use in all London schools)

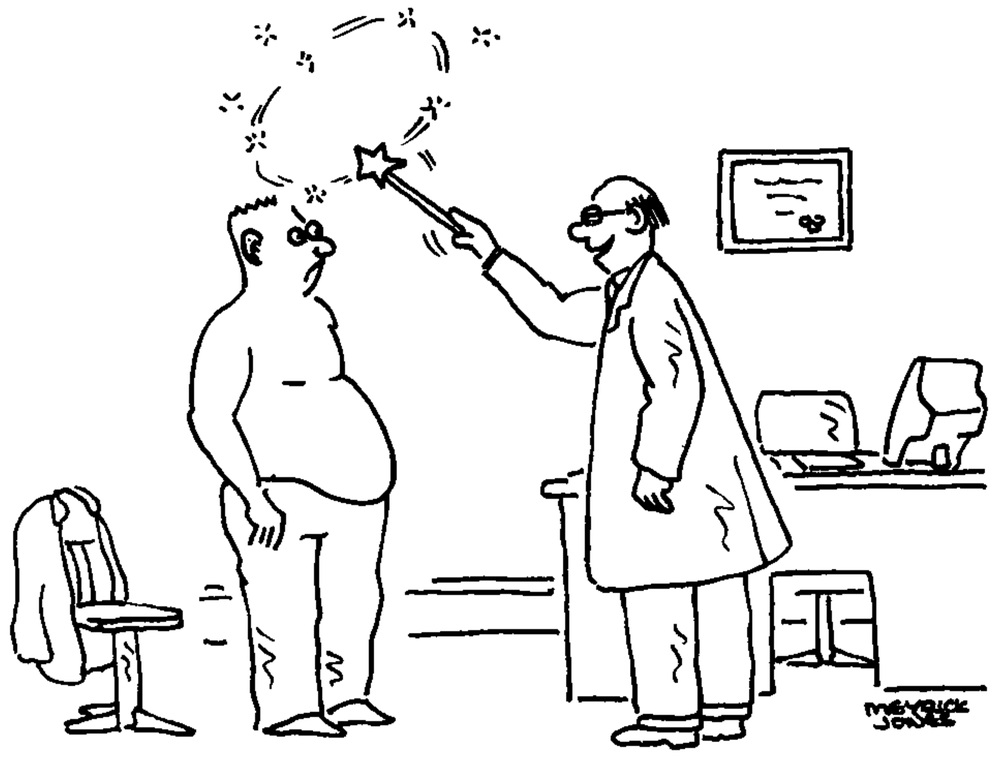
Iran	= Small country full of Jews up to no good.
Iraq	= Large country run by Ayatollah Khomeini, to be included in congestion charge zone in 2008
Israel	= Small country controlled by Evening Standard newspaper, full of people called Reuben, Mohammed, Lady Porter etc. *(Is this right? Ed.)*

"He's such a challenging little lad!"

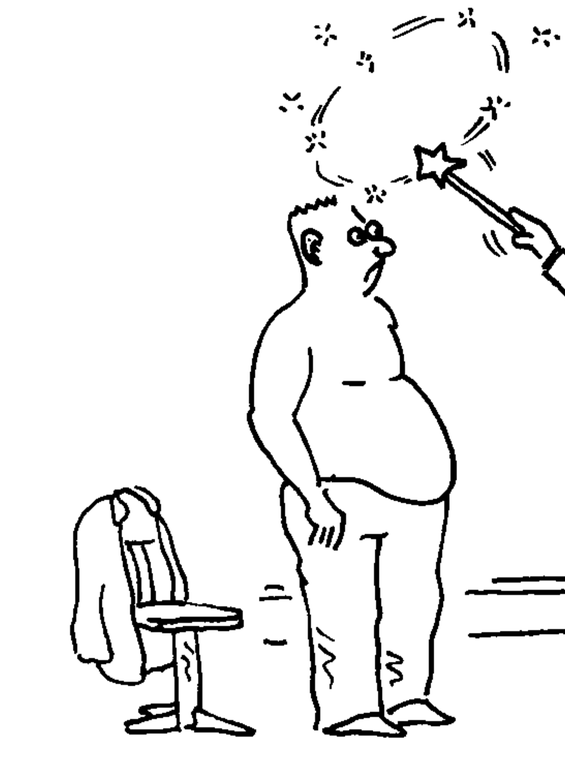
I-SPY *Clapham Junction*



Submitted by Paul Cloutman.



"Mainstream medicine has become far more open to ideas that were previously dismissed as just plain cranky"



UNIFORM GIRL DEMANDS RIGHT TO CONTINUE

by Our Legal Staff JOSHUA ROSENBURQA

A DEVOUT lawyer yesterday vowed to continue her fight to wear traditional robes and wig and to defend her human right to earn a million pounds a day.

Cherie Blair, 53, has doggedly pursued her cause through the courts despite the objections of her critics.

"It is a victory for women's rights," she said, "that I can argue in favour of the jilbab for schoolgirls and get paid hugely for doing so."

There were accusations that members of her family had forced her into taking the case, particularly her husband, Tony Blair, a member of the shadowy New Labour organisation.

Headscarfcase

Tony, however, denied it. "Yes, we need the money to pay for our mortgage, but it is a matter of principle for Cherie that she be allowed to wear the wig and fight for what she doesn't believe in."

Let's Parlez Anglais!

by Kilometres Kingtonne

Part 94 Dans Le EU

French Delegate: Ladies and gentlemen, may I begin my remarks by...

Monsieur Chirac: Pourquoi parlez-vous anglais?

French Delegate: Because English is now the universal language of the business community...

Monsieur Chirac: Sacre bleu! Zut alors! Merde! Espèce de cochon!

French Delegate: I'm afraid I can't understand a word you are saying old boy, eh what?

(Exit Chirac dans un grand bate)

To be continued...

POLICE LOG

Neasden Central Police Station

Office hours: 9-12 Mon-Tues (except Tuesday)

22 March 2006

0815 hrs A '999' call was received by PC Urquhart to the effect that a young woman was being stabbed to death in the park by a gang of multi-ethnic youths out on parole. The caller seemed distraught and incoherent, and his report of the situation was hard to decipher owing to constant interruption by a hysterical female in the background. Asked by PC Urquhart if the alleged assault was of a homophobic or racist nature, the informant informed him in a totally uncalled-for and brusque tone that this was "a murder" and suggested that the police should proceed to the scene without delay. PC Urquhart reminded the caller that operational prioritisation was a matter for the police to decide, not a member of the public. The call was entered in the day-book as a routine non-emergency incident, and a request was placed with the Signage Unit to prepare a notice to be placed in the vicinity of the park reading "Professional murderers are operating in this area. Please take care."

1145 hrs A complaint was received from a member of the public, a Mr Alex Salmon, who described himself as "a member of parliament" and claimed to be the leader of an ethnic minority organisation, the Scottish Nationalists. Twelve officers were immediately deployed to interview him at the House of Commons, where he alleged that a crime had been committed by a Mr Anthony Blair, resident at 10 Downing Street SW1. The suspect had allegedly been responsible for a series of offences under the Sale of Peerages Act 1922. The officers were unable to obtain access to the suspect's residence, due to security measures being in place around the building. Officers therefore adjourned for a "de-brief" to a nearby restaurant, Simpson's-in-the-Strand. Four hours later, the officers made another attempt to interview the suspect, but were told that he was not available as he had left the country for what was described as "an EU summit". An email was sent to our colleagues in Europol with a request that Mr Blair should be kept under surveillance until further notice. Whilst waiting for a reply to this email, the officers adjourned for a period of rest and recreation at the RAC Club.

2346 hrs Officers returned to the station to complete their overtime claims, only to find that the Neasden police service has been merged with those of Humberside, Cornwall and West Mercia under Mr Charles Clarke's rationalisation and modernisation programme. The station has apparently been sold to Chai Patel Nursing Homes plc for redevelopment, and members of the force have been redeployed to train as security advisers to the Afghan opium industry.

EXCLUSIVE TO ALL NEWSPAPERS

Coleen then

THE MOST BEAUTIFUL WOMAN IN THE WORLD

by Phillipa Style-Page

Coleen now

ONLY LAST week some critics were labelling Coleen McUgly the 'Queen of Chavs' and the 'Pikey Princess'.

From her council-estate face-lift to her tracksuit bottoms and dated Ugg Boots, Coleen could do nothing right in the eyes of the fashionistas.

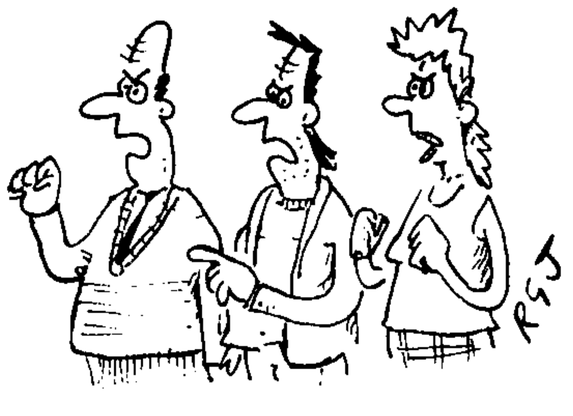
But now, a week later, Coleen McLovely has blossomed into the best-looking supermodel on earth. From her trend-setting hairstyle to her elegant tracksuit bottoms and cutting-edge Ugg Boots, Coleen can do no wrong in the eyes of the style gurus.

In one word, she is stunning, gorgeous, sexy, slim, tanned, toned and, above all, the girlfriend of the footballer we all want to get access to in the run-up to the World Cup. Come on, Wayne, give us an exclusive please (or we'll start saying she's a minger again).

© *All newspapers.*

THOSE SERBIAN RESPONSES

Thousands of Muslims murdered



One Milosevic not murdered

POETRY CORNER

In Memoriam Slobodan Milosevic and Humphrey the Cat

So. Farewell then
Serbian tyrant and
Number Ten
Pet.

You both occupied the
Seats of power
And were responsible
For many
Deaths.

The one of Bosnians,
Croatians, Kosovans etc.
The other
Of mice and
Robins.

Though both of you
Claimed to be
Innocent
(Except Humphrey).

E.J. Serb (17½ thousand dead)

CHURCH TO STAR IN ADVERT

"Shall I open another bottle?"

LOVE ON THE NILE

By Dame Sylvie Krin

THE STORY SO FAR: Charles and Camilla are making a visit to the mysterious and ancient land of Egypt.

Now read on...

"IT's incredible to think that those Pharaoh chaps could do all this thousands of years ago."

Charles, in a Merchant and Ivory panama hat, waved his pencil in the direction of the unmistakable towering mass of the Great Pyramid of Cheops.

The midday sun was blazing down mercilessly on the royal party, as the prince sat at his easel, trying to capture the tricky outlines of the last surviving wonder of the ancient world.

"I mean, those kings were allowed to rule for thousands of years, without people constantly criticising them and publishing all their diaries and so forth."

As Camilla wilted in the heat, trying to cool herself with a traditional glass of chilled Fruit 'n' Khamun herbal tea (which, according to the label, had been "drunk by the pharaohs since time began"), she scarcely had the energy to reply. "Yes, Chazza. Can we go back to the hotel now? It's bloody hot."

Charles shook his head, and dipped his brush again in the yellow ochre. "Hang on, old thing, I've just got to get this pyramid-thingie right, but that camel keeps getting in the way."

Indeed, at that moment, a swarthy *fellahmalad*, or local tribesman, tugging his reluctant camel behind him, approached the prince, with his hand stretched out in expectation.

"You paint my picture, Effendi, you pay me 80 dollars, or the curse of Allah will be upon you."

"No, no," remonstrated the prince. "I'm all in favour of this Allah chap. That's why I'm here – to build bridges between our two great faiths."

The camel-minder was, however, unmoved by the prince's plea.

"Ok, you no give me money. I take woman instead."

At this point Camilla had had enough.

"Stuff this for a game of soldiers, Chazza. You can shoot the breeze with Johnny-Arab here. I'm going back for a shower and a lie-down."

As a squad of highly-armed tourist police materialised from behind the nearby Sphinx to escort the hapless camel-owner into the Nile, Charles was left alone to complete his emergent masterpiece, which he had already provisionally entitled *"Study Of Pyramid and Camel by His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales"*.

But as the midday heat became ever more oppressive, the royal artist found his eyelids growing heavy and a darkness seemed to descend on the land...

SOMEHOW Charles seemed to see before him a scene of extraordinary activity as thousands of semi-naked slaves toiled in the desert to raise a pyramid larger than any that had been seen before.

It was he, he knew, who had designed the whole thing as a monument to his lifelong love of architecture.

And there were his plans, etched on

the sheet of papyrus, with a series of hieroglyphs proclaiming it as "The Great Pyramid of Chazza", in the Valley of the Nearly-Kings.

What a moment this was, when the vision he had nurtured over millennia was finally coming to fruition, despite all the ill-informed criticism from jealous scribes and petty bureaucrats. Not to mention the scorn of his aged mother, the great Queen Neferdie, who had already ruled for 800 years, and who, some said, had doomed all his efforts with the so-called "Curse of the Mummy".

This would show the world, he thought, "Look upon my works, ye mighty despair sort-of-thingie," he declaimed to the sweating masses to whom he had given employment under his imaginative and so little-appreciated Pharaoh's Trust scheme, where the young people of Egypt could learn to use traditional vernacular materials to create the world's first fully-organic pyramid.

But what was this cloud of dust approaching him across the desert sands?

It was a messenger on a camel. As he drew nearer, Charles recognised the familiar features of the Egyptian carpet-seller Mohamed Al Fayed, who had earlier offered him his entire stock in return for a passport.

"Fuggin' bad news, oh great one," declared the newly-arrived messenger. "It's official. The Princess Diana, your beautiful bride, *was* killed in a chariot accident. And it's all your fault. As exclusively revealed by me in the *Niley Express*, it was you and your father, Philip of Macedonia, the wily Greek naval commander, to blame."

Charles clutched his head in despair. This story he was dreaming seemed strangely familiar.

But even worse was to come. The dusky merchant smiled as he explained that, by popular decree, the new pyramid was to be demolished and replaced by a giant water feature, to be known as "The Diana Memorial Fountain (closed for repair)".

And, as if by magic, the pyramid vanished before his eyes, to be replaced by an immense circular trench, with the entire River Nile flowing through it, while thousands of workers joyfully shouted "Great is Diana of the Egyptians. All hail to Her Highness..."

"HIGHNESS... Highness... Your Highness. It's time to go." The voice of Sir Alan Fitztightly broke in on Charles's reverie.

"They're all waiting in the Great Hall of the ancient Islamic University of Al Ahn Qu'ran to give you your honorary degree."

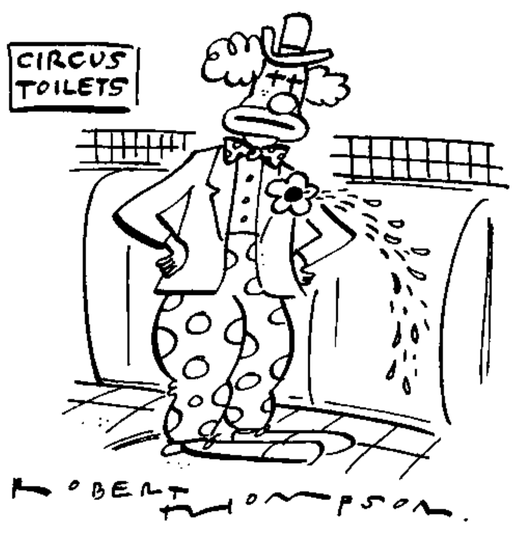
"Is that for my pyramid?" Charles asked, as he emerged from his now fast-fading dream of greatness.

"Do you know, Fitztightly, they're actually putting a fountain where my pyramid used to be. It really is appalling."

"Indeed, sire, but we really must get you out of this heat..."

(To be continued)

© Sylvie Krin, from the Swan-Hellenic Nile Cruise Collection 2006.



Introducing Our Brand-New Columnist

NORTON MYDAY MP

He used to be important. Now he's not. So he's writing for us.

THE MORE we learn about the details of the secret loans paid to Tony Blair before the last election by rich businessmen, the more disturbing the whole episode becomes.

These respected businessmen gave this money in the expectation that they would be awarded peerages – yet to date none of them have received one! This simply demonstrates the astonishing bad faith of the current Labour Government.

In my day, the minute we found a brown envelope stuffed full of cash in the in-tray at Party HQ, that donor's peerage was on the way quicker than you can say "ermine robes".

How can the Labour Government ever be expected to have an ounce of credibility ever again with the public after the shabby way it has treated these men?

How many words is that? Can I have my £500 please?

A Doctor Writes

AS A doctor, I'm often asked, "Doctor, will you please clear your desk and get out as you have been fired?"

Well, the simple answer is "yes". What happens is that the doctor is suffering from Hewitt's Disease or *Hospitalis terminensis* to give it its full medical title.

There is no known cure for this life-threating condition. If you are worried about Hewitt's Disease – tough.

© *Department of Health.*

LABOUR TREASURER 'KEPT IN THE DARK' SHOCK

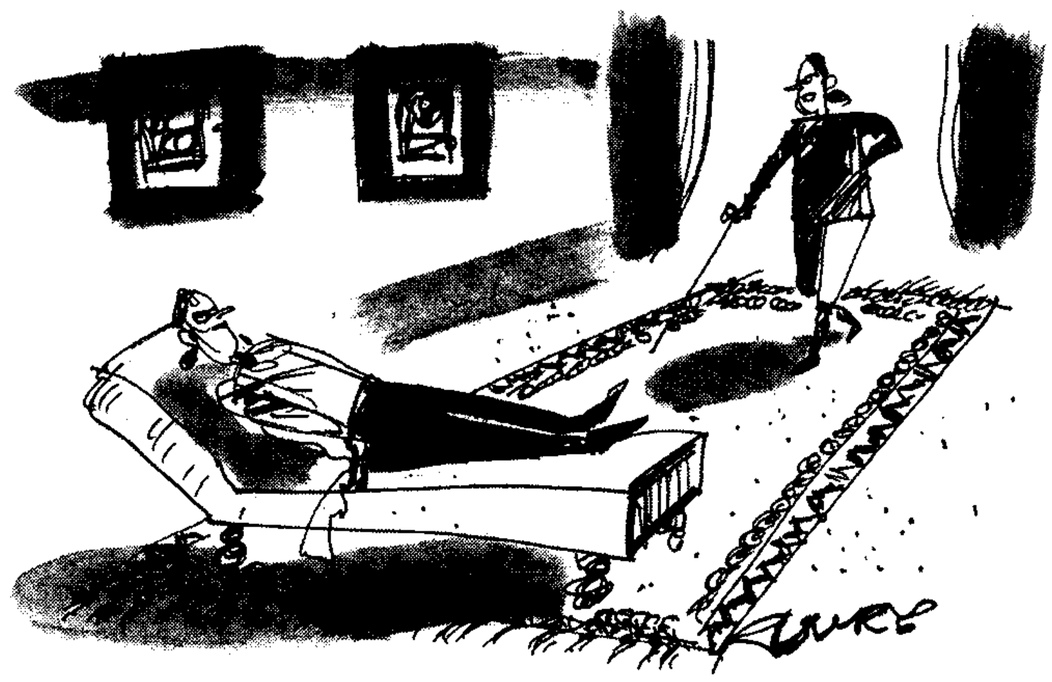
by Our Political Staff **Phil Coffers**

THE MAN at the centre of the Peers-For-Loans row, Mr Jack Dromey, today claimed that key information was denied him during the whoile affair.

"For a start," he told reporters, "I had no idea that I was Treasurer of the Labour Party. I was under the impression that I was working for a political organisation committed to wholesale privatisation, American defence policy and personal enrichment.

"Imagine my anger," he continued, "when I discovered that this was actually the Labour Party.

"Next thing they'll be telling me I'm married to Harriet Harman." *(cont. p. 94)*



"That's typical of you, Keats – conspicuous consumption"

New Words

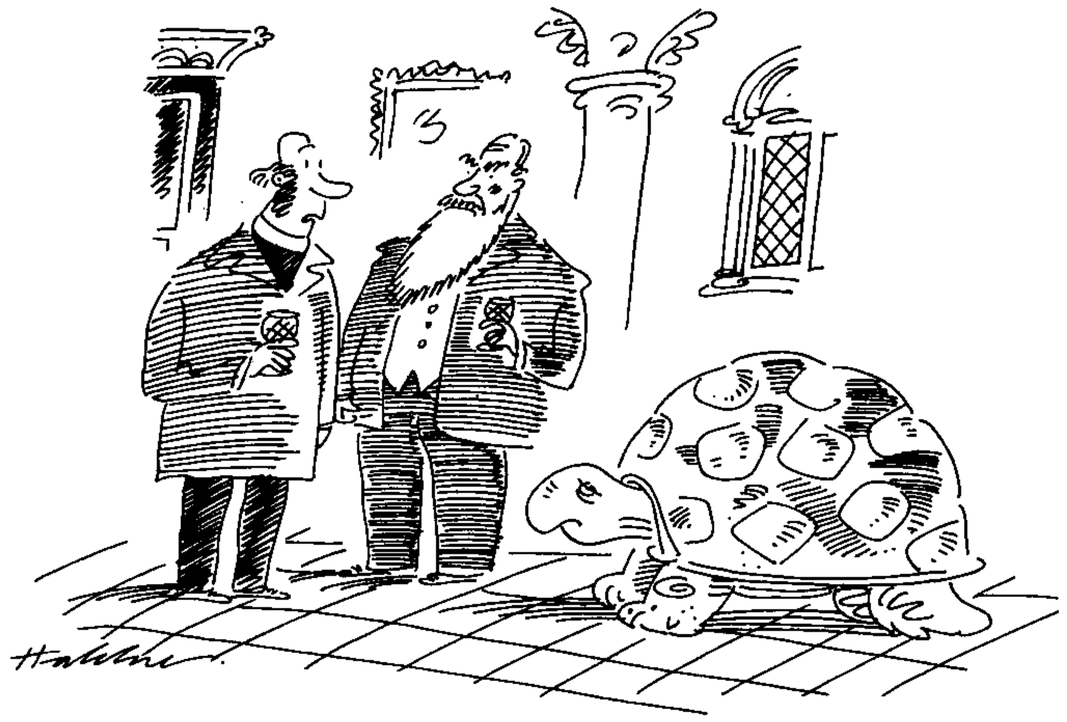
Loan *(noun)*: A gift of money, usually for political purposes, which does not have to be given back. Example: "Thank you for your very generous loan. Your peerage is in the post" *(letter from T. Blair to an unidentified entrepreneur, 2005)*.

Parole *(noun and verb)*: System whereby dangerous criminal is released from prison so that he can re-offend as often as he likes. Example: "It was unbelievable – the murderer in this case wasn't on parole" *(Court proceedings, 2006)*.

Life *(noun)*: Period of time uniquely used by judicial officials – about two weeks *(see above)*.

Tory *(noun)*: Political term used to describe supporter of the Labour Party. Example: "Of course he's a staunch Tory – he's in favour of high taxes and against grammar schools" *(Daily Telegraph, 2006)*.

Acronymby *(noun)*: Person who dislikes feeble political acronyms. First used by David Cameron, "Only the acronymbies won't like my new word 'Bananas'" *(from 2006 speech "Concreting Over South-East England – The Tory Way")*. For "Tory", see above.



"So, Mr Darwin. You say he followed you home from the Galapagos?"

LORDS SLEAZE ROW DAY 94

NATION SHOCKED

THE nation was shocked and outraged today after it was revealed that the current government was handing out seats in the House of Lords by way of patronage to large party donors.

"Just thank goodness that no other government in the past few hundred years realised that the unelected chamber could have been used in this way," said a horrified *(cont. p. 94)*

ALDRIDGE RESIGNS

THE Executive Chairman of Crapita, Rod Aldridge, has insisted there was nothing improper about his million-pound loan to the Labour party.

"I fully expect the loan to be repaid within a year at current market rates of three multi-billion pound contracts to install worthless computer systems in the DSS and NHS," said Rod *(cont. p. 94)*

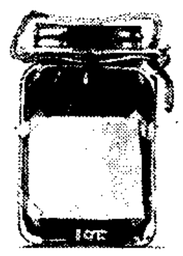
TORY EMBARRASSMENT

CONSERVATIVE leader David Cameron has insisted today that it is only right that his party refuses to name those businessmen who had made large anonymous loans to the Conservative party before the last election.

"Those businessmen are embarrassed enough that they didn't have enough sense to give the money to Labour to help themselves to a dodgy peerage, without me adding to their chagrin," said the Tory *(cont. p. 94)*

CAMILLA'S WOMEN'S INSTITUTE JAM RECIPE

1. Tell Cook to make some jam.
2. Er...
3. That's it.



NEXT WEEK: Camilla's recipe for a State Banquet for 250 people.

DIARY

Tony Blair: Look, Humphrey wasn't just a cat. He wasn't even just the Downing Street cat. He was a lot, lot more than that. Yes, Humphrey was the People's Cat.

And let me add this. To many ordinary decent British people, Humphrey was not just a cat. Humphrey was a lion. Humphrey was the lion of all our hearts.

Yes, Humphrey may have died. But his spirit lives on.

And that's an achievement this Government can be proud of.

Fergal Keane: Those terrible words – words so many of us prayed we'd never live to hear – came through this morning.

Humphrey is Dead.

They were words that fell on me with the painful impact of a heavy load off the back of the lorry of fate.

Humphrey. Purring one minute. The next minute, purring no more.

I write this with the tears pouring down my cheeks and onto my granda's typewriter like the gentlest shower in an April rainfall.

Even the mice on this mournful day will be down on their knees in sorrow, praying for the repose of his eternal soul, and thankful – deeply thankful – for the privilege of having known him.

Humphrey was a cat, but he was so much more than a cat. His sudden death makes me want to stop for a moment and think about myself.

And through the tears and the weeping and the grief and the sobs, I think of me. Did I ever tell you about me?

Patricia Hewitt: I have heard some of our opponents try to argue that Humphrey is dead.

I understand their concerns, of course I do. But I would beg these people not to play party politics with a cat's life.

Yes, he may not be running around much any more. I accept that. And yes, he may not be breathing. I accept that too. There is always room for improvement.

But in every important respect, Humphrey has never looked better. I have it on the highest authority that he feels extremely content in his comfortable box in his hole in the ground. A box, may I add, that continues to meet all our targets.

His continued presence in that box is a tribute to our National Health Service, and to all those hard-working doctors and nurses and ancillary staff without whom our hospitals simply would not have such an efficient turnover.

And that must surely be a good thing.

HUMPHREY THE CAT: R.I.P.

Ben Elton: Miaaoooow! Yeah, gang! Let's ROCK!

Humphrey's truly brilliant miaowing and purring (and how the guy managed to do both I'll never begin to know!) was the soundtrack to all our lives. His tragic death made me feel ever so humble. But it also made me want to pay tribute to a legend. So with the aid of the tremendous musical melodies of that mellifluous maestro Andy Lloyd-Webber, I hope to recreate something of that hip cat's truly unforgettable magic in "HUMPHADOODLE-DO!" at Her Majesty's Theatre, opens May 9th, tickets £35-£60, sorry guys, no special deals for group bookings.

Piers Morgan: Humphrey? A great mate. Legend in his own lunchtime!! When I was editor of the Mirror, we'd go out and get through a saucer of milk or two, I can tell you!

I used to pull his tail a bit – and I once had some fun throwing him from an upstairs window! – but he was a mate, so I had no hard feelings, none at all.

Mind you, by the end, Humph got too big for his boots. When I crept up and trod on him at the end of 2002, he refused to see the funny side of it, but the same goes for everyone in Downing Street, pompous bloody twats, what do I care? I'll have a glass of the bubbly stuff, since you're asking.

David Cameron: We've done some amazing things with cats in the past. And we aim to do some amazing things with cats in the future. And not just cats, but dogs. We're going to do some amazing things with dogs too. And let's not forget goldfish. Goldfish have a vital part to play.

On the whole cats issue, I aim to do nothing less than to undertake to renew our sense of determination to push through a broad, balanced and compassionate programme with a renewed sense of purpose. For me cats are the vital building blocks of a civilised society. First, we must reach out to cats, then we must harness them, and finally we must we must lose no time in pushing them through young people. And that's the whole reason I came into politics.

Geoffrey Levy, *Daily Mail*: Over the past week, friends and relations – not to mention dubious millionaire business contacts, many of them originally from overseas – have paid fulsome tribute to Humphrey the Downing Street Cat.

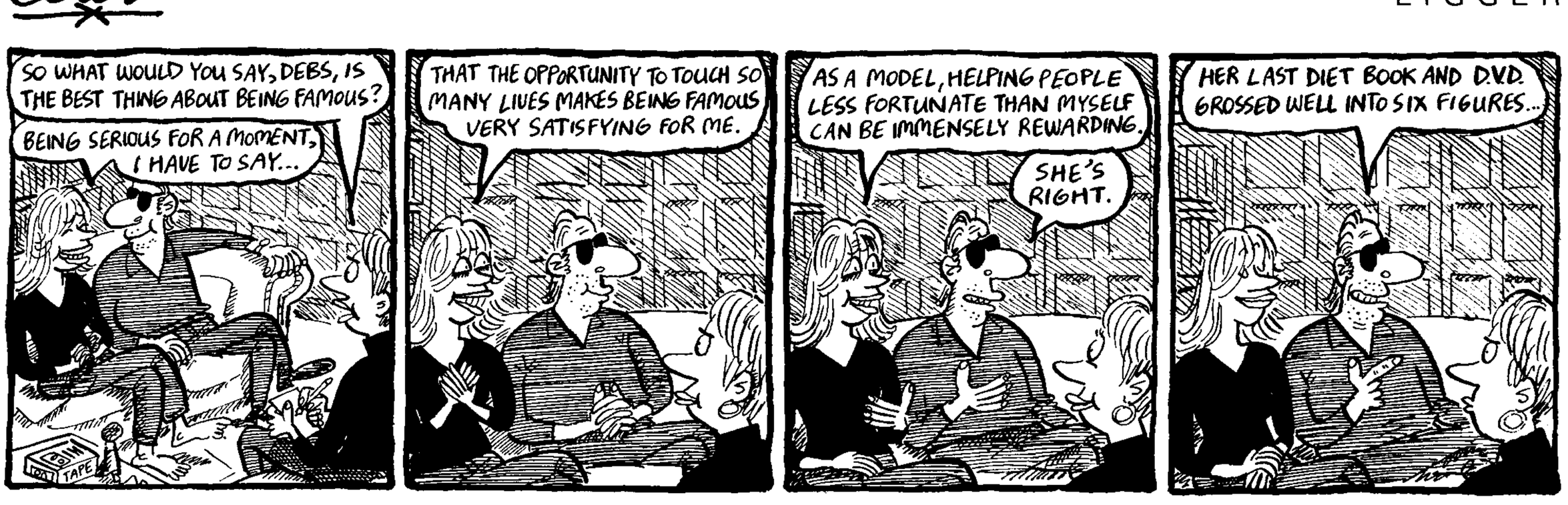
But – close friends are now starting to ask themselves – who was the REAL Humphrey? Behind the carefully-cultivated image of Everyone's Perfect Moggy, former associates are beginning point to another, more sinister, Humphrey – a Humphrey who, some say, could often be found on all fours in the dead of night with his tongue out, chewing his way through a bowl of Kattomeat Chunks.

There is as yet no firm evidence that Humphrey was a persistent user of hard drugs, frequently shooting up on the Downing Street staircase, perhaps in an ill-concealed attempt to conquer his severe weight problems. But close friends are secretly prepared to admit that he took delight in murdering defenceless mice. To the outside world, Humphrey seemed to have it all. But those close to him knew him for what he was: a serial killer.

Tony Blair: Look, I don't want to have to keep returning to this question. I'm not denying that I recommended Humphrey the Cat for a seat in the House of Lords. I'm not denying it at all. That's not the kind of guy I am. But frankly where would we be if a decent, hard-working captain of industry with vital skills which he was willing to put to the service of this country was excluded simply on the grounds that he happened to be the former Downing Street cat? Frankly, if that had been the case, you guys would all now be criticising me for not raising Humphrey to the peerage. Frankly, you can't win, can you?

As told to

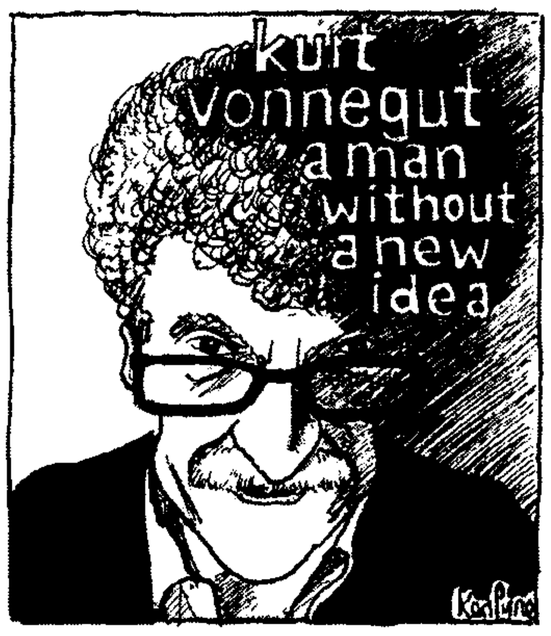
CRAIG BROWN


SO WHAT WOULD YOU SAY, DEBS, IS THE BEST THING ABOUT BEING FAMOUS?
BEING SERIOUS FOR A MOMENT, I HAVE TO SAY...
THAT THE OPPORTUNITY TO TOUCH SO MANY LIVES MAKES BEING FAMOUS VERY SATISFYING FOR ME.
AS A MODEL, HELPING PEOPLE LESS FORTUNATE THAN MYSELF CAN BE IMMENSELY REWARDING.
SHE'S RIGHT.
HER LAST DIET BOOK AND D.V.D. GROSSED WELL INTO SIX FIGURES...
TAPE

Literary Review

Too left feat

A Man Without a Country
Kurt Vonnegut
(Bloomsbury, £14.99)



HERE's Uncle Kurt, boys and girls. Eighty-four this fall, goddamn it, as ornery as a skunk up a fuzzy tree, brimful of piss 'n' vinegar – I believe this is the correct transatlantic expression – just itching to give us the benefit of his opinions on the good old US of A and, as such, the flag-carrier of a distinctively *American* way of thinking. I mean, Dame Antonia Byatt probably doesn't care much for Tony Blair, but you doubt she'd sanction a book of her doodlings on the subject with a wacky portrait of herself on the cover just to let the party planners at Number Ten in on the secret.

The sub-title, *A Memoir of Life in George Bush's America*, is possibly an offence against the Trades Descriptions Act; at the same time prospective readers will be relieved of any lurking doubt over the book's import. Boy, is Uncle Kurt mad! Sometimes he says damn it. Other times, when some presidential inanity or overseas depredation particularly irks him, he even says fuck! Wow!

For the record, the book runs to a meagre 144 pages, its scant 15,000 or so words deviously bulked out by way of white space, diagrams purporting to explain the dynamics of, say, Kafka's *Metamorphosis* or *Hamlet*, and whole acres given over to thought-provoking slogans. The one on page 45 announces "Evolution is so creative. That's how we got giraffes." The one on page 94, alternatively, begins "We do, doodley do, doodley do, doodley do, What we must, muddily must..."

Indeed we doodley do, and trust an old hippy to take a new line on determinism. What distinguishes these harangues about the C Students from Yale – Vonnegut's collective term for Dubya and his cronies – is their terrible folksiness, their "you knows" and "I guesses", their unquenchable habit, in a work of anorexic slightness, of taking a ramble. Uncle Kurt here, he likes a goddamn stroll now and again... down to the stationery kiosk on 48th Street to buy one of those big Manila envelopes and ask people in the line "Do you know anybody who ever won anything in the lottery?" and "What happened to your foot?", back to the talismanic figure of Eugene Debs, former Socialist presidential candidate and author of the immortal words "As long as there is a soul in prison, I am not free", off again to the Gettysburg Address and the letters folks have sent him protesting at the goddamn no-good assholes in the White House.

Let's hear it for Uncle Kurt! He doesn't mind chancing his arm with the odd platitude ("...power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Human beings are chimpanzees who get crazy drunk on power"); he sure is fond of a joke ("Do you know why I think George Bush is so pissed off at Arabs? They brought us algebra"); and maybe he has his own private phantoms to chase (observant readers may note a mild gag or two about that vanished Nobel Prize). And every so often, among these exceedingly well-intentioned statements in favour of family life, decency, disarmament and honourable conduct, comes another of those folksy little down-home illustrations of ideal ways to behave. Absolutely characteristic in this respect is the tale of the Ibo whom Uncle Kurt rambles into in Nigeria. The former is out taking his newly born baby son to meet his 600 or so relatives. "Everybody who was big enough and steady enough was going to get to hold it," Uncle Kurt croons, "cuddle it, gurgle to it, and say how pretty or how handsome it was. Wouldn't you have loved to be that baby?"

No, actually. It is impossible to convey quite how irritating this kind of thing is. By the end, though, an altogether sharper irritation prevails. Doubtless there are more effective opponents of George W than Uncle Kurt somewhere in those uneasy hinterlands beyond the Washington bunkers, and yet the final effect of this little scrapbook is horribly symbolic. If you wanted a measure of the dreadful depths to which the old liberal American left has been reduced, even here in a world of Middle East conflagrations and dwindling oil fields, well goddamn, here it is.

Books & Bookmen

■ WHEN David Roche, new chief executive of Borders, declared that "indiscriminate discounting is not intelligent retailing", it might have appeared a bit rich given that he had previously been product director at Waterstone's, whose discounting policy has seemed to verge on the suicidal in recent times.

In fact Roche is being consistent. He told a conference in September 2004 that booksellers "don't want to, or indeed need to... match the supermarkets on price... we need to add value and emphasise our differentiation". So, even if his superiors seemed hell-bent on matching Tesco and Asda's paper-thin margins, someone at Brentford knew it was folly. Could his appointment to one of the top book retail jobs be about to herald an outbreak of commonsense in the trade?

■ THE future looks grim for Simon & Schuster UK and its managing director Ian Chapman.

The company has made a loss for much of Chapman's tenure, but posted a £800,000 profit in 2004, following redundancies and restructuring. Then, last November, further redundancies, the demise of the Scribner and Free Press imprints and a reduction of titles from 350 to 250 per year indicated that the corner hadn't been turned. There is now the prospect of a slow death with cut after cut until S&S UK reverts to being the import arm of its US parent (itself in a spot of bother).

Or could the death be quicker under new ownership? S&S owner Viacom has indicated that the whole caboodle is up for sale if the right price is offered, and the takeover-crazed Hachette – owner of Orion, Hodder Headline and Time Warner Books – is the name in the frame. The US arm would be the main focus of interest, and the rump of the S&S UK list could well be redeployed among Hachette's existing profitable companies. Meanwhile, many who remain are wondering how Chapman himself has managed to avoid redundancy. His salary – believed to be around £350,000 a year – would go a fair way to balancing the books.

■ A FEW weeks ago the *Times Literary Supplement* printed an angry tirade against the Canadian magazine *World Literature* for daring to feature on its cover "a Chandleresque dame in a little black dress and high heels, looking at the reader holding a gun". Though the dame in question was an author – thriller-writer Tara Moss – the *TLS* felt appalled that a serious literary magazine should run such titillating pictures.

So who then turned up on the cover of the 17 March issue of the *TLS*? *Celebrity Big Brother* bimbo Chantelle, who is not known ever to have read a book let alone written one. With *TLS* circulation having fallen to 33,000 last year – 10,000 lower than its rival *London Review of Books* – is editor Sir Peter Stothard hoping to boost readership with a pitch at readers of *Nuts*?

■ MORE news of *The Righteous Men*, the thriller by "Sam Bourne", aka *Grauniad* bigwig Jonathan Freedland. Michael Dibdin's unflattering review was spiked by the *Grauniad* at Freedland's behest, but eventually appeared in the *Times*.

Now the *Observer*, the *Grauniad*'s sister paper, has now run a review by one Matilda Lisle, who seems equally underwhelmed: "Overly silly... a vast pile of old nonsense... it isn't much of a book." Her only faint praise is deliciously condescending: since the novel probably isn't "the worst example" of Dan Brown-style tosh ever published, she concludes teasingly, Freedland "should not feel shy to call it his own".

The previous review infuriated Freedland so much that he demanded the *Guardian* never print a word by Michael Dibdin again. What hideous punishment awaits the pseudonymous "Matilda Lisle" when he learns she is actually Alex Clark, assistant literary editor of the *Observer*?

■ ADVANCED Books Exchange, better known to online secondhand book shoppers as abebooks.com, has created a strong position for itself in the bookselling market. Worldwide, 13,500 booksellers use it to list the books they have on offer and to arrange online ordering; and its search facility lets collectors keep an eye out for copies turning up anywhere from Hay-on-Wye to New York.

At first ABE charged a flat monthly fee and allowed customers direct contact with the booksellers via the site, to ask questions or arrange payment by cheque. Then, a couple of years ago, it introduced an 8 percent commission on sales. Now a new contract, starting on 3 April, is to introduce mandatory credit card processing with a whopping 5.5 percent card processing fee. To avoid people by-passing this system, it will also provide less contact information for booksellers.

Members of the Antiquarian Booksellers Association are planning a one-day boycott in protest at what is now a 12.5 percent surcharge per book.

'Bookworm'

SNIPCOCK & TWEED
IT'S THE STORY OF A WOMAN WHO STUMBLES ON AN AMAZING SECRET:
LABYRINTH KATE MOSSE
LABYRINTH
– YOU HAVE TO GET YOUR BOOK PLUGGED ON RICHARD AND JUDY!
OTHER BOOK CLUB BESTSELLERS
SOLD OUT

Polly Fillers

The Rise and Fall of a Yummy Mummy
Polly Williams
(Time Warner Books, £12.99)

The Yummy Mummy's Survival Guide
Liz Fraser
(Harper Collins, £12.99)

WHAT BLISS! Two heavenly books for Mother's Day, a profitable convergence of chic-lit and post-natal affirmative goo.

First, a novel about the "yummy mummy" phenomenon that treats the subject with all the seriousness it deserves, ie not very much! And with a heroine to match. Me, of course! My name is Amy Crane, I'm a former PR girl on maternity leave, and I'm now the proud mother of baby Evie, product of my union with tall, handsome, tan-suited, Birkenstock-shod boyfriend, Joe Costello. I lead what to the outward observer must seem a life of perfect contentment, with my leisurely trips to the park, Pilates classes and gossipy Chablis sessions with my mum-chums while New Man changes the nappies and cooks my dinner.

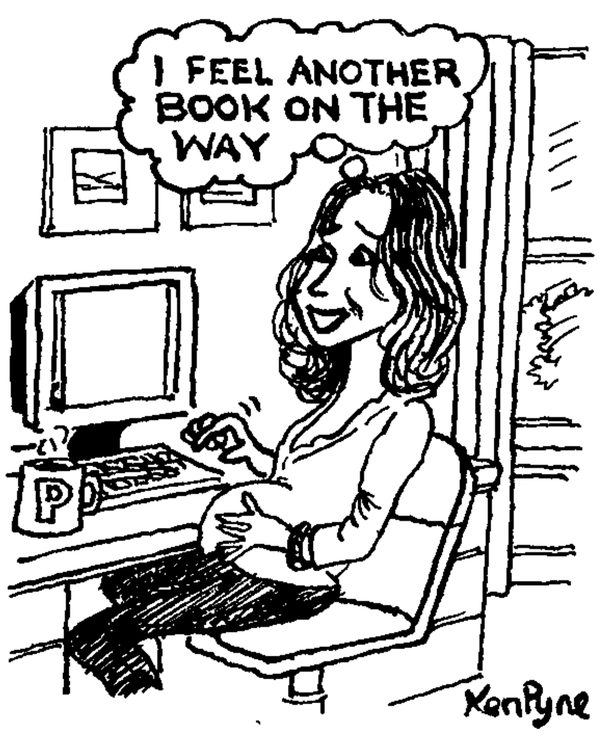
So why aren't I happy? What could possibly be missing?

Probably nothing, in fact, but there has to be some sort of story on which to hang my zeitgeisty title and a blizzard of contemporary brand names. And so my glamorous friend Alice convinces me that my life is dull and I look a sleepless wreck and I let her persuade me to embark on Project Amy, a misguided attempt to effect a drastic makeover. This begins with a nightmarish experience in the waxing department of the local beauty parlour, but goes on to include bankrupting shopping trawls for designer clothes, Botox injections from dodgy doctors, and a fling with my dreamy Pilates instructor, Josh.

In the course of this fake's progress I manage to alienate and then get dumped by Joe, whom I wrongly suspect of having an affair, realising too late that he was The One for me, not that phoney ego-masseur Josh, and oh woe is me! and why oh why? But 370 pages later all misunderstandings are cleared up, a bottle of champagne is brought to the table, the engagement ring sparkles and true love wins the day.

In other words, exactly the same plot as most chic-lit novels about angsty insecure singletons, with the added ingredient of a pram in the hall and occasional references to leaky breasts and pongy Pampers.

One is not a bit surprised to find that the author, according to the blurb, "is married with one child and lives in London". Nor indeed to discover that she writes for the *Daily Mail*, which recently carried a quiz inviting contestants to assess



to what extent they conformed to the "yummy mummy" template. This seems to depend on what sort of shops you go to (Asda or Accessorize) and whether you were "able to juggle career, children and domestic life and make it look easy and glamorous".

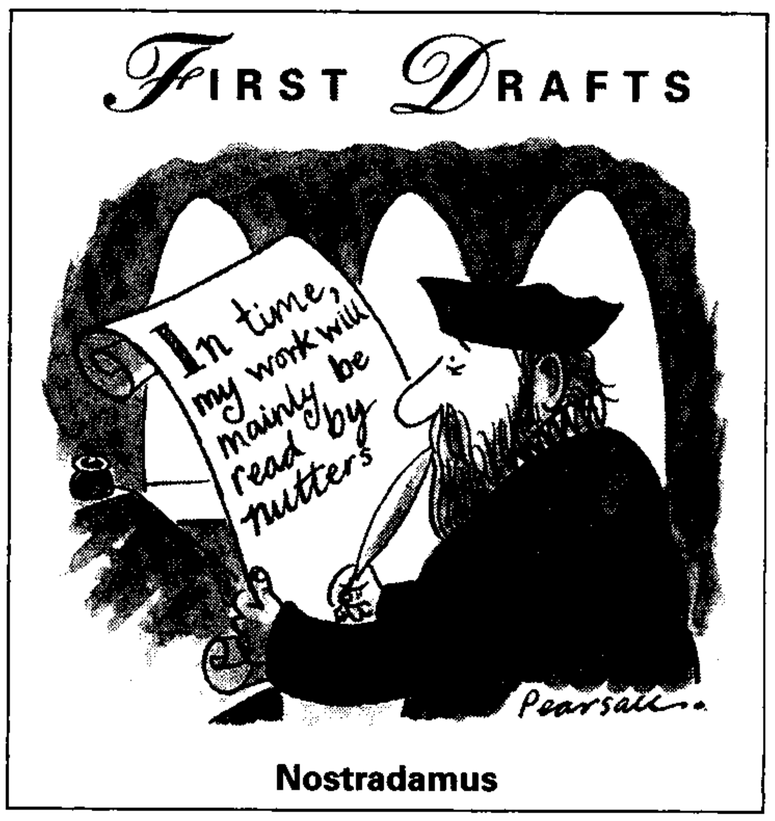
There's more to it than that, of course, though not much. But that hasn't stopped Liz Fraser, another young mum with a writing career, from rustling up the "indispensable guide" to yummy mummyhood, which (according to the blurb) "every woman can carry around in her handbag".

Books about babies are enjoying a population explosion right now and it has been hard for the style merchants to find a new angle. Though the name was once applied to a breakfast cereal, the current concept of the "yummy mummy" seems to have been co-opted from the more dodgy realms of slang usage, where it lies uneasily close to the "MILF", or Mother I'd Like (to) Fuck, a term of approbation invented by hormonal suburban teenagers. But lo and behold, it is now a term of empowerment, signifying a do-it-all domestic goddess with workplace attitude and red-carpet glamour, a sort of celebrity it-mum.

Perhaps to broaden the appeal of her book Fraser is forced to adopt a rather vague and woolly definition of this paragon as someone who "does not identify with the traditional, dowdy image of motherhood" but who "tries not to let being a good, loving mother utterly compromise her personal style and outside interests". It is probably safe to say that no western child-bearing woman since the 1950s would fail to fit in with some part of her definition of the "ultimate modern woman". Though cutely presented, the book itself is a repackaging of much the same advice you can already find in lots of other practical guides to pregnancy and early motherhood, such as Eisenberg et al's *What to Expect When You're Expecting*. The difference is that it also contains lists of designer shops for maternity wear and those essential lotions and potions without which, of course, your pregnancy and birth experience would be horribly humdrum and inexclusive. Not for you the trip to Mothercare or the maternity department of John Lewis. Oh no. You shop at Formes, Green Baby and the somewhat oxymoronic Homme Mummy.

And when the "babymoon" is over and you're ready to go back to work, you do it part time, not "having it all" like those power-mums of the me-generation, just having the best. Or better still you set up your own bijou little online company selling designer maternity wear and essential oils and you call it Yummy Mummy (except you can't because there are already loads of websites using that name, suffixed dot com, dot co, dot net, and so on).

But of course the ultimate yummy mummy part time job to go back to is... writing books about being a mum.



Nostradamus

LIBRARY NEWS

■ "OUR public lending library heritage is being badly managed and directed from above," complained the Conservatives' culture spokesman Mark Field in a letter to the *Times* this month.

The shadow minister added that "calls for significant improvements in our library service now come loud and clear", warning that a once great service was at risk of withering on the vine.

Meanwhile, in a desperate attempt to balance its books, no pun intended, Surrey County Council is to close Bagshot and Virgina Water public libraries. The council is controlled by... the Conservatives.

Pseuds Corner

[Pete] Doherty has something of the young Coleridge, wide-eyed, open-mouthed, a moon-gazer, while [Carl] Barat is more your Wordsworth type: slightly sterner, more firmly rooted to earth, less wild and unpredictable, but brilliant nevertheless. Like Coleridge and his mates, the Libertines boys lived in communal situations, in housesits and squats, in poverty... The publication in 1798 of Lyrical Ballads, a poetic joint project, revealed Wordsworth and Coleridge's new democratic conception of "man speaking to man". In similar fashion, the Libs also attempted to redefine the relationship between band and fan.

TOM HODGKINSON reviews Anthony Thornton and Roger Sargent, The Libertines: Bound Together, *Independent on Sunday*

At lunch the place is packed with people of every age and background, and we queue cheerfully for 40 minutes. Then Nicole, my two sons, Lewis and Joe, and our friends Capucine and Nicholas (who are to marry in Villefranche in July) sit down to prawn and coriander dumplings, scallop dumplings, crab ravioli in soup, Vietnamese spring rolls, paper-wrapped prawns, spare ribs and chicken feet in black bean. I don't see how life could be pleasanter.

Then, just 72 hours after her press show, Nicole leaves on Eurostar to search in Paris for the fabrics for her next collection.

DAVID HARE,
Guardian

The cottage is architecture dressed to thrill. It will infuriate hard-core contextualists. And although it might be beyond gestalt redemption, its geometry and materials give this mystic banana a mannerly feel.

JAY MERRICK,
Independent

HE YUNCHANG DRAGON FISH a 24 hour performance
He Yunchang will write the two Chinese characters that form the words Dragon Fish on the ground then run around them in a circle for 24 hours continuously

Performance taking place at the Atrium, Forth Street, Newcastle

BEAUMONT – On February 25th to CAMILLA (née Huntington-Whiteley) and GINO, a daughter, Hermione Popocatepetl

Daily Telegraph

CONTRIBUTORS: Strobes, Howard Baker, John Boyden, Jack Arthurs, Pam Hutchinson

£10 paid for all entries

IN THE BACK

BUDGET SPECIAL

Cheat now, pay later

WHAT price Gordon Brown's ambition and vanity? Even though the chancellor gleefully pointed to foreign economies with double the UK's level of debt, he remains desperate not to breach his self-imposed (and entirely arbitrary) golden rule that public sector debt stays within 40 percent of gross domestic product.

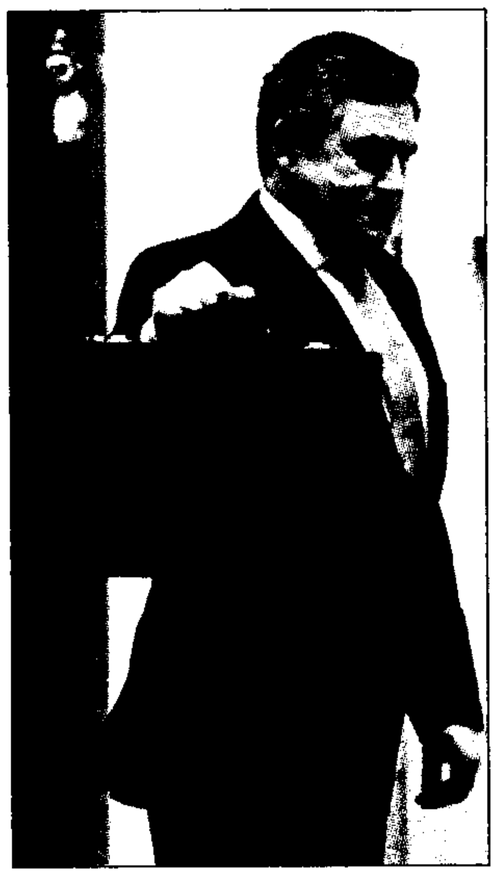
At the same time Gordon needs to announce continued investment, but can't afford the borrowing that must go with it when, even on his own optimistic projections, his debts will be over the 38 percent mark next year. The only way to resolve the conundrum is with the accounting trick that is the private finance initiative, enabling the commitment to pay for new investment to remain off the government's books. And so, in a document quietly released alongside the main budget statement, came the news that over the next five years £26bn worth of PFI schemes would go ahead. Were these to be funded conventionally, more than 2 percent would be added to the debt figures and the 40 percent rule would be broken – irrelevant to the economy but crucial to Brown's reputation.

Paradoxically, the economy is crying out for more government debt, as tighter pension fund regulation and an ageing population force funds to look to the safe haven of the gilt-edged securities that could fund public investment plans. But considerations of economic good sense must play second fiddle to Gordon's legacy. Thus in the past few weeks officials and industry representatives have been frantically trying to breathe some life into PFI as it becomes more and more discredited, not least by the scandal that shall not be mentioned: mushrooming NHS trust deficits. Conveniently-timed reports from the privatised PFI promoter Partnerships UK (PUK) and PFI consultant Deloitte have pronounced life in the old dog yet and promised a range of contrived structures to "modernise" PFI, coincidentally guaranteeing enormous fees for the bankers and consultants for years to come. Tellingly, the one part of PFI to have fallen out of favour is the provision of services over the 20- or 30-year life of deals – the one element that did not help to keep liabilities off the government's books.

The Treasury paper announcing the expansion of the scheme, *PFI: strengthening long-term partnerships*, was full of claims that users of PFI, ie the managers who signed up to them in the first place, are quite happy. Yet again the policy was justified by the enthusiasm of those responsible. But an impartial view could hardly have been expected from a department whose top PFI man, Richard Abadie, is on secondment from the biggest PFI consultancy of them all, PwC.

Meanwhile, a few weeks ago the National Audit Office (NAO) quietly withdrew from work it was doing on the use of PFI for building and running hospitals – which was widely expected to be very critical – on the grounds that it was "re-assessing the scope" of the project. The NAO's helpful move, averting much Treasury embarrassment, may or may not be connected to a fact the *Eye* has recently discovered: under a complex formula, for every PFI scheme signed the NAO is judged to have saved the taxpayer money – giving the supposedly objective public spending watchdog its own vested interest in yet more schemes.

Once again those with most to gain have rallied round to support the ailing PFI while the scheme continues to escape independent scrutiny, flatter the public finances and line many private sector pockets. The only losers are patients, pupils and taxpayers who will pay yet more for the policy for a generation to come. But what are they next to a great chancellor's legacy?



Brown is the new green

PLANTING the idea of higher duty on 4x4s in the media before the budget worked a treat for Gordon Brown. Gullible hacks described it as a "green tax" that would "hit" owners of big cars.

But vehicle excise duty (VED) is an annual payment unrelated to mileage, so can't be used to encourage people to drive less. VED rates linked to car emissions could help the environment if they encouraged or forced people to buy less-polluting cars – but that's unlikely when the new top rate for the biggest diesel-guzzlers is just £215 a year. And that's only £20 higher than VED for the next band down, a penalty that's meaningless to anyone thinking of spending over £25,000 on a new 4x4.

One way Brown could have made people think twice about buying these cars was to increase fuel duty on unleaded petrol and diesel used in cars and lorries – but he chose to freeze that again.

Interestingly since April 2003 this duty has increased by 0%. However in the same period duty on diesel used in passenger and freight trains has increased 53%.

PS. An indication of how green Brown really is was his approach to the greatest contributor to greenhouse gasses – air transport. This was untouched.

FREE bus travel for OAPs popped up in the budget (again) because the chancellor has decided to modify the scheme he announced last year even before it unleashes chaos when it goes live on April fool's day.

Brown wants to copy the Welsh Assembly's scheme, where oldies have free travel across Wales. But his original version for England, designed to buy grey votes in last year's general election, guarantees free travel only in the district or county of residence. That's caused immense difficulties for councils implementing Brown's edict, because for many elderly people the nearest town, city, hospital or bingo hall is across the local council boundary.

Some have agreed cross-boundary free travel or half-price travel outside the home district. Times of day when the pass is valid vary between districts. Bus drivers must memorise this mass of rules, as OAPs will board with passes from different districts. The scheme is such a shambles that more than 700 buses a week have been lined up for the chop in the north-east to help cover the costs.

Now Brown has decided on nationwide free travel, to be implemented in 2008. He could have avoided much costly admin by copying the Welsh scheme in the first place – but then he wouldn't have had two bites of the cherry.

FOLLOW-UPS... FOLLOW-UPS... FOLLOW-UPS...

■ **HEALTH REFORMS:** Patricia Hewitt's attempts to slash NHS hospital costs by treating more patients "in the community" have been cruelly exposed in the health secretary's own Leicester constituency.

Leicester City West primary care trust is one of two PCTs planning to axe funding of the palliative and cancer care team (PACCT) services provided by Leicester Charity Link.

Local health chiefs – like so many debt-ridden trusts making difficult choices – justify the PACCT move by saying it offers no direct "health benefits". Said Clive Smith, non-executive chair of Leicester Charity Link: "This very measurement is ludicrous when applied to terminally ill patients. Surely we should have the sensitivity and commonsense to understand that the diagnosis of terminal cancer has ramifications far beyond the pathological process?"

The PACCT works as part of a multi-disciplinary team caring for 900 dying patients and their families every year, helping them deal with a range of problems – often financial – that they encounter as a result of their illness. Last year working with three hospitals, they secured £2.19m in benefits and more than £135,000 in charitable grants to help these patients and ease their anxieties. The cost to the six local PCTs? A little over £160,000, split between them. So much for Hewitt's "care in the community".

■ vCJD: The vCJD Trust, set up to compensate families of the victims of the dreadful human form of "mad cow" disease, added insult to injury last month when it placed confidential and personal financial details relating to them on its website.

Some families have already been highly critical of the vast sums City law firm Charles Russell has paid itself and others to administer the trust. Over the three years it has been administering the scheme, it has paid out £16.7m to 158 victims, while incurring costs of £5.3m, of which £3.2m was paid to itself. For every £10 paid to a victim, £2 went to Charles Russell.

Last month a list of 117 victims and their identifying numbers was included in the amended trust deed enabling any idiot to match those up with the trusts accounts on the same site to reveal the names of individual victims and details of compensation paid to each of the families.

A complaint has been made to the Law Society and to Sir Robert Owen, the high court judge who chairs the trust and who has apologized.

INSURANCE

Panel beating

CONCERNED at the appalling public image of insurance companies (caused by collapsing with-profits returns, endowment mortgage mis-selling scandals and so on), the Association of British Insurers hired recruitment consultant Odgers to find people willing to spend just one or two days every few months sitting on its new Customer Panel to advise insurance giants on how they should treat the public.

But actual customers are the last people the ABI wants in the £1,000-a-day posts. In fact, according to the candidate brief from Odgers, having an insurance policy is not even a condition of the job, nor is any knowledge of financial services. Instead the ABI has set its sights on people with boardroom experience, "ideally in consumer retail industries".

Just to ensure this independent panel doesn't become too independent, it has now been announced that the position of chairman will be filled by former Scottish Widows chief exec and one-time ABI chairman Mike Ross, now a director of Pearl Group. Just the man to represent customers.

CHRISTIAN BLEWITT APPEAL

Salt in the wound

A LEADING chemical pathologist told the appeal court last week that he did not believe Angela and Ian Gay had force-fed their three-year-old foster child with a fatal dose of salt (see *Eyes passim*).

The Bromsgrove couple were sentenced to five years at Worcester Crown Court in January last year after being convicted of the manslaughter of toddler Christian Blewitt.

But Dr Glyn Walters said that Christian suffered from a failure of his regulatory system, called "osmotic resetting", which meant that the levels of salt in his blood were wrongly controlled by the body. In other words, his body would maintain "grossly abnormal sodium concentrations" instead of excreting excess levels away. It was a kind of "salt diabetes".

Dr Walters said this rare condition would explain why Christian's sodium levels did not reduce as they should have done after he was admitted into intensive care in hospital. The amount of sodium chloride in his urine remained unnaturally low and in his blood unnaturally high.

Readers may recall that when the *Eye* first highlighted this troubling case after the couple's conviction, experts were deeply divided about the salt poisoning theory – the only "expert" paper on it having been written by none other than controversial paediatrician Sir Roy Meadow. There was absolutely no evidence about how, when or why the couple could have force-fed so much salt to a three-year-old.

One paediatrician told the original trial that he believed there was a natural cause – possibly a little known condition or disease at the frontiers of medical knowledge – just as Dr Walters has now described. And Home Office pathologist Dr Peter Acland said publicly that he believed the couple to be the victims of a miscarriage of justice. "Certainly on the medical evidence, there is 'significant doubt' that the couple had killed the child with salt," said Dr Acland.

Other troubling aspects of Christian's health, which were never explored during the Gays' trial, including a "unique" history of heart muscle damage in a child so young, and hydrocephalus – diagnosed on one his many admissions to hospital long before he went into the Gays' care.

Angela and Ian Gay will have to wait to learn if they are to be given leave to appeal. The judges have reserved their decision.

CORPORATE KILLING

Collar and sty

YOUTHS, protesters, asylum seekers and all sorts of other unmentionables have felt the full force of Labour's draconian crime policies recently, but one group remains untouchable: directors of the largest companies.

Home Office Minister Fiona MacTaggart (pictured right) this month published the government's response to a parliamentary committee's calls for tougher corporate killing laws in the wake of incidents such as the rail disasters at Ladbroke Grove, Potters Bar and Hatfield where, despite failures going to the top of the companies responsible, nobody could be convicted of any offence.

Following heavy lobbying from industry on the corporate manslaughter legislation that the government has been promising but not delivering for nine years, MacTaggart rejected the committee's demands to introduce the possibility of criminal charges against directors. But rather than tackle the issue head on, she hid behind the excuse that "we do not consider that legislation designed to tackle a specific difficulty with corporate liability is the right place to review this framework for additional liabilities".

The most severe punishment an individual

director will face will be disqualification under existing law as the government boldly "recognises that a conviction for corporate manslaughter will raise important questions about the overall management of the company". Experience of existing law, however, shows that this simply does not happen. The top men at Railtrack, Balfour Beatty and a host of other culpable companies continue to prosper in the country's boardrooms.

Last September *Eye* 1141 reported how gas supplier Transco was fined £15m in a Scottish court for failing to ensure the safety of its pipes, despite knowing of the dangers they posed for years, leading to an explosion that killed a family of four. The board continued to put corporate deals, dividends and their own inflated pay packets above safety. But none of those responsible could be touched, while among the press only the *Eye* tarnished their reputations by naming them.

The Scottish Executive has yet to decide whether to follow the Home Office's lead and let those running such companies off the hook. In England at least directors can continue to put the bottom line before lives and escape prosecution regardless of the consequences.

BRITISH ENERGY SALE

The usual suspects

GORDON BROWN's plans to sell off as many assets as possible to shore up his finances mean yet another round of privatisation-nationalisation ping pong for British Energy.

The nuclear generator was first sold in 1996 but by the end of 2002 was facing bankruptcy. Confronted with the prospect of nuclear power stations lying idle and dangerous, the government had no alternative but to step in. As usual it ensured that the rescue provided the biggest possible bonanza for the suits.

This month's National Audit Office report on the effective re-nationalisation of the firm four years ago, which has lumbered the taxpayer with £5bn worth of nuclear clean-up liabilities, reveals that advisers pocketed £29m between them from the taxpayer and British Energy – and didn't even have to compete for the work.

In appointing the bank CSFB, which received £11m, and accountants at Deloitte (£10m) as handsomely paid financial advisers, the DTI failed to ask any other firms to bid for the work. By the end of 2005, the auditors reported: "In the case of the [DTI's] contract with CSFB, the actual fees paid significantly exceeded the capped amount put in place on the original contract."

The NAO didn't mention, however, two remarkable coincidences: the DTI's shareholder executive (the body that looks after the government's shareholdings) is run by Richard Gillingwater, appointed in 2003 from… CSFB; and he is ably assisted by two secondees from, er, Deloitte.

The impression of Gillingwater's body as little more than a club for well-connected bankers and accountants isn't reduced by the fact that exactly the same double act advised it on Royal Mail's funding. And CSFB also won the big recent privatisation gig as adviser on the stock market listing of QinetiQ (on whose board Gillingwater sits to represent the government).

Don't bet against the same firms' names cropping up on the next nuclear sell-off.

POLICE DEATH

Coroner's caught

THE sister of a young mentally ill man who died after being held face down in the mud in his garden by up to five police officers, is trying to overturn an inquest jury's "accidental death" verdict.

Lawyers for Helen Cash are to challenge in the high court a coroner's decision not to allow the jury to consider a verdict of unlawful killing or any other verdict which could have reflected concern over police conduct in the detention of her brother.

Northampton coroner Ann Pember declined to give any reason for refusing to allow a verdict other than accidental death or an open verdict to be put to the jury.

The inquest had heard that Malcolm Cash (pictured above) had taken a small quantity of sleeping pills and had slashed his wrist with a razorblade and was already unsteady on his feet and slurring his words when police were called in support of an ambulance crew to the home he shared with his girlfriend, Louise Allan, in Wellingborough.

The razorblade was in his back pocket and he was tearful and begging his girlfriend to stay when police decided to "take him down". He had declined help from ambulance staff who described him as "verbally aggressive" but agreed he was not violent and had made no threat to anyone other than himself.

One officer swept away Mr Cash's legs and the others held him down and handcuffed his hands behind his back. According to police, they held him down for 30 to 90 seconds; but witnesses said it lasted minutes and that officers knelt on his back.

Police said that after they sat him up, Mr Cash had difficulty breathing and so they carried him to the ambulance. Mr Cash's friends and girlfriend said his face had already turned blue when the officers pulled him up from the ground. The ambulance crew attempted to resuscitate Mr Cash, but he never recovered consciousness. He was 29.

The jury heard from pathologists and a toxicologist that the amount of sleeping drugs Mr Cash had taken was not a fatal dose and although the cause of death was complex, lack of oxygen played a part. Lawyers argued that being held face down was likely to have been a factor.

Lawyers acting for Helen Cash argued that the jury could conclude that not only had police used unreasonable force pinning her brother down, but they had also detained him unlawfully. They had given him no warning he was to be arrested; nor until they came to give evidence at the inquest had they considered under what power they were arresting him: one thought it was under the Mental Health Act, another suggested it was over a breach of the peace.

One officer was recorded on his radio stating to his head office that "I want to grab everybody that was in at the start 'cos we're going to have to make sure that we fucking scribble this up properly". The same officer asked his station officer to call him back on his mobile so the call would not be recorded.

James Bell, solicitor for Helen Cash, told the *Eye*: "There was a lot of evidence for the jurors to consider, but they were never given a chance to comment on it."

If Northamptonshire police had had their way, Helen Cash would have had no voice in the process at all. Lawyers for the force argued that she did not qualify as an "interested party" because she was only Mr Cash's adoptive sister. It might well have suited Knacker to have the death examined by only the coroner and police themselves. But that was one argument Mrs Pember was not prepared to accept.

You can contact the In the Back team on 020 7437 4017

In the City

"THE committee reacted very violently to the non-political backgrounds of some people. The fellows have never done anything."

That was the robust comment of Lord Crathorne, a Labour member of the Honours Scrutiny Committee, on the rogues and chancers as well as obvious Tory sympathizers who dotted Harold Wilson's notorious Lady Falkender-inspired "Lavender List" of almost 30 years ago.

A similar response seems to have greeted Tony Blair's latest "loans for peerages" list from the Lords Appointments Committee, which has managed to block four of the Dear Leader's nominees whose sole claim to fame appeared to be that they were prepared to take out their chequebooks.

"Thanks a lot, son – I'm afraid it's all geek to me "

The fact that so many of those who, it has now emerged, loaned Labour almost £14m last year to pay for the election had links to the offshore tax havens so despised by the prime minister-in-waiting, Gordon Brown, appears to have either been unknown to chief fundraiser Lord Levy, himself no stranger in Tory times to offshore attractions, or of no concern.

Let's start with the Minerva property duo Sir David Garrard and his partner Andrew Rosenfeld, who loaned £2.3m and £1m respectively. From Minerva's stock market flotation in 1996, the bulk of their shareholding was held offshore either by trustees in Liechtenstein (Klaus Biedermann, Thomas Wilhelm and the Codex Trust in Vaduz) or offshore companies in Jersey: Herling and Hummel Investments.

They represented the D.E. Garrard 1989 Trust, as well as the A.I. Rosenfeld Trust and the Garrard Rosenfeld Settlement. Both Garrard and Rosenfeld also had large shareholdings in their own names.

This situation maintained as recently as 2003 when first Garrard, already knighted by Labour after becoming a donor for £200,000 despite being a previous Tory supporter, and then Rosenfeld began to make substantial share sales from their family interests. These sales coincided with a reduction in their executive roles at Minerva.

In March 2005 Garrard announced his decision to step down as chairman; and at the same time it was disclosed that "certain of Sir David's family trusts and a company in which the family trusts and the Garrard family are interested" had sold 13.46m shares for £35.1m. These shares came mostly from the holdings of the Jersey-registered Herling, which sold more than 6m shares, and the Vaduz-controlled holdings in the names of Biedermann and Wilhelm representing the Garrard and Garrard Rosenfeld trusts.

There were three linked Liechtenstein holdings managed by Codex, a well-known fiduciary company in Vaduz, representing separate Garrard and Rosenfeld trusts as well as their joint trust. That joint trust holding had already sold 2.2m Minerva shares in December 2003, seemingly on behalf of Garrard whose stake reduced by that amount.

In September last year Rosenfeld announced that he was to become non-executive chairman and that "trusts in which his family are interested" were selling 13.75m shares for £35.3m. These shares came from Herling (6.2m) and the A.I. Rosenfeld 1989 Trust and the Garrard Rosenfeld Settlement. The latter two stakes had been held in the name of the Vaduz trustees.

The tax avoidance effectiveness for UK residents of such offshore trusts and companies has changed since those for the benefit of the Garrard and Rosenfeld families were legally set-up. But it would be interesting to know what – if any – capital gains tax was paid on the more than £70m realized by the Garrard and Rosenfeld interests. The probable maximum after taper tax relief could have been 10 percent. Zero is also possible.

In those circumstances it is not surprising that both Garrard and Rosenfeld – neither identified as Labour party members – could afford to be so generous. But then it has since emerged that on two occasions John Prescott's office had waved through controversial Minerva property projects in Croydon and the City. Prescott has strongly denied any linkage between donations/loans and planning green lights.

The Minerva twins are not the only tax haven fans to be found among Labour's lenders. Non-domicile qualifiers Dr Chai Patel (£1.5m) and Sir Gulam Noon (£250,000 on top of his previous generous donations) have both benefited from family trusts established in Jersey and Guernsey. Patel has now said he will repatriate the £45m his trust received from the sale last year of his interest in Priory healthcare group so that the trust, like him, will become UK taxable. This was the route followed by Lord Levy – the man who tapped Patel for the loan instead of a donation – just before or soon after Labour came to power in 1997.

Almost as surprising a member of the Labour lenders list as Garrard and Rosenfeld is Richard Caring, supplier of cheaply produced clothes to high street chains such as those of his close friend Philip Green. Caring, with no previous links to Labour, loaned £2m but perhaps like others with a hankering after recognition. After all, as Pitt the Younger declared: "Any man who is master of £10,000 has a right to a peerage." And Richard Caring has much more than £10,000.

He is also no stranger to Lord Levy on the Jewish charity circuit, as no doubt are the Minerva twins and stockbroker Barry Townsley, another £1m lender, who like Garrard, Patel and Noon has had his peerage blocked by the appointments committee. Townsley is also a co-director with Caring of his hotel and restaurant interests.

Caring's reputation as a businessman who has become rich by sourcing from factories based in low wage and often no union countries in the Far East and Eastern Europe is hardly even New Labour. Especially as his main business, International Clothing Designs (Holdings) is controlled from Hong Kong.

As a UK resident, Caring is no doubt a UK taxpayer. But it is interesting to note that his two recent big non-rag trade deals, for the Wentworth golf club complex and Signature Restaurants (the Caprice and the Ivy), now involve offshore companies based in Jersey as shareholders. CH Acquisition shows shares being issued to Kingscliffe Holdings in Jersey for £3.4m. Wentworth has as a major shareholder WG Acquisition from the same Jersey address, which paid £34m for shares in WGA (UK) Holdings, which controls the golf/hotel group. Caring may of course have no connection with the Jersey companies, although he is a director both CH Acquisition and WGA (UK). All perfectly legal and proper for a New Labour convert. And benefactor.

There are other similarities with the Lavender List, which did so much to damage the Wilson reputation and Labour. On that list were the names of Lord Joseph Kagan and Sir Eric Miller. Both were soon the subject of police or Department of Timidity & Inaction investigations. Kagan fled to Israel. Miller killed himself. An earlier Labour peer, Desmond Brayley, was also a target of the inspector.

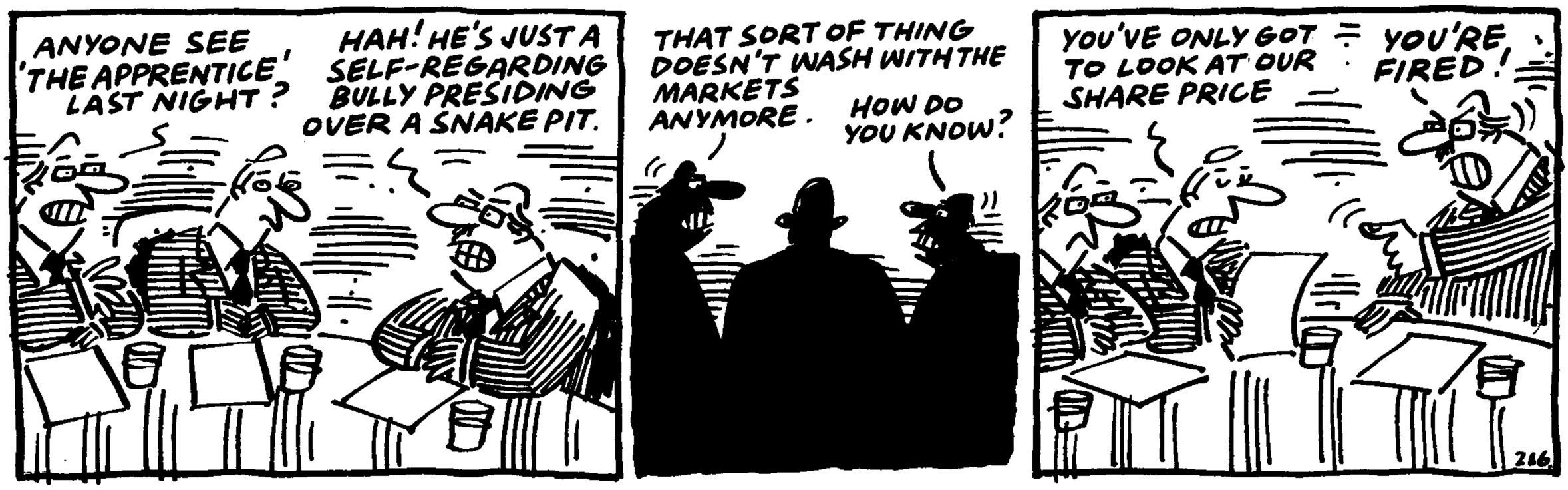
The latest Labour lenders list includes two names currently of interest to the Serious Farce Office – Townsley and Sir Christopher Evans, who loaned £1m and has already received a Blair knighthood.

Stockbroker Townsley was closely involved as an adviser with the directors of the collapsed Langbar International, formerly Crown Corporation, who hoodwinked the City into believing it had assets worth £365m in Brazil. Townsley's firm was involved from the flotation. The key Langbar directors and their associates are now being sued for fraud by the new board. They are also being targeted by the SFO. Townsley is not a target but is expected to be questioned as a witness. He denies any wrongdoing.

So too does Evans, whose stewardship of Merlin Biosciences has been questioned by a former business associate. Allegations regarding £2.5m are said to be at the heart of the complaint made to the SFO last summer. The SFO investigation became public last September although Merlin and Evans are understood to have been aware of the complaint earlier. Whether Evans was aware of the SFO investigation at the time he made the £1m loan is unclear. Anyway, he insists there is nothing in the allegations. But still,

THE DIRECTORS

DREDGE & RIGG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Stock Horror

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it is far from helpful to Labour to have to own up to two benefactors who are embroiled in SFO investigations.

All the loans are said to be on commercial grounds with interest payable and are supposed to be repayable in one or two years. Some are likely to be waived – though not, it seems, by those who received embarrassment not ennoblement. Whether repayment was always planned along with the rolled up interest due with repayment is open to question. To that extent the description "commercial" may be somewhat different to that used by such normal lenders as banks. Furthermore, as none of the lenders is in the loan business, they would not be able to obtain a tax break on any written-off loans and would pay tax on any interest. So at least that is no different from any normal Labour donor.

"You and I know that the sale of honours is the cleanest way of raising money for a political party," declared David Lloyd George. "The worst of it is you cannot defend it in public." Lloyd George's government was brought down in 1922, largely by the furore surrounding his final honours list and the activities of his honours bagman, Maundy Gregory.

That list was so egregious that even George V was compelled to write to the Welsh Wizard complaining that it was "little less than an insult to the Crown", referring in particular to the "personality of some of the recipients and the questionable circumstances under which the honours in certain instances have been granted".

That scandal largely propelled the creation of the 1925 Honours (Prevention of Abuses) Act banning the sale of honours. This is the act under which Scotland Yard is now investigating the Labour loans-for-peerages scandal. However, few expect any result. Such arrangements are never made in writing so there is most unlikely to be any paper or electronic trail to lead to a trial.

Despite the fact that all parties have been trading honours for cash from donors for decades, it is the truth that, post Lloyd George and Maundy Gregory, never dare speak its name. Lord Curzon as Tory leader in the House of Lords complained to Lloyd George about the "emphatic assurances that I have given on no fewer than three occasions in the House of Lords on your behalf and on behalf of the government that there neither was nor had been nor would be any traffic in honours". Identical ringing denials have rolled out from Labour ministers in recent weeks.

Lloyd George was succeeded by the first Labour government. And one of Ramsay Macdonald's first acts was to award a baronetcy to a biscuit manufacturer in exchange for £30,000 in shares and a car! Lavender List. Loans for peerages. Neither Hegel ("governments never have learned anything from history") nor Lord Acton ("absolute power corrupts absolutely") would have been surprised.

'Slicker'

EYE CROSSWORD 310

by Cyclops

£100 prize to first correct solution opened on 7 April 2006

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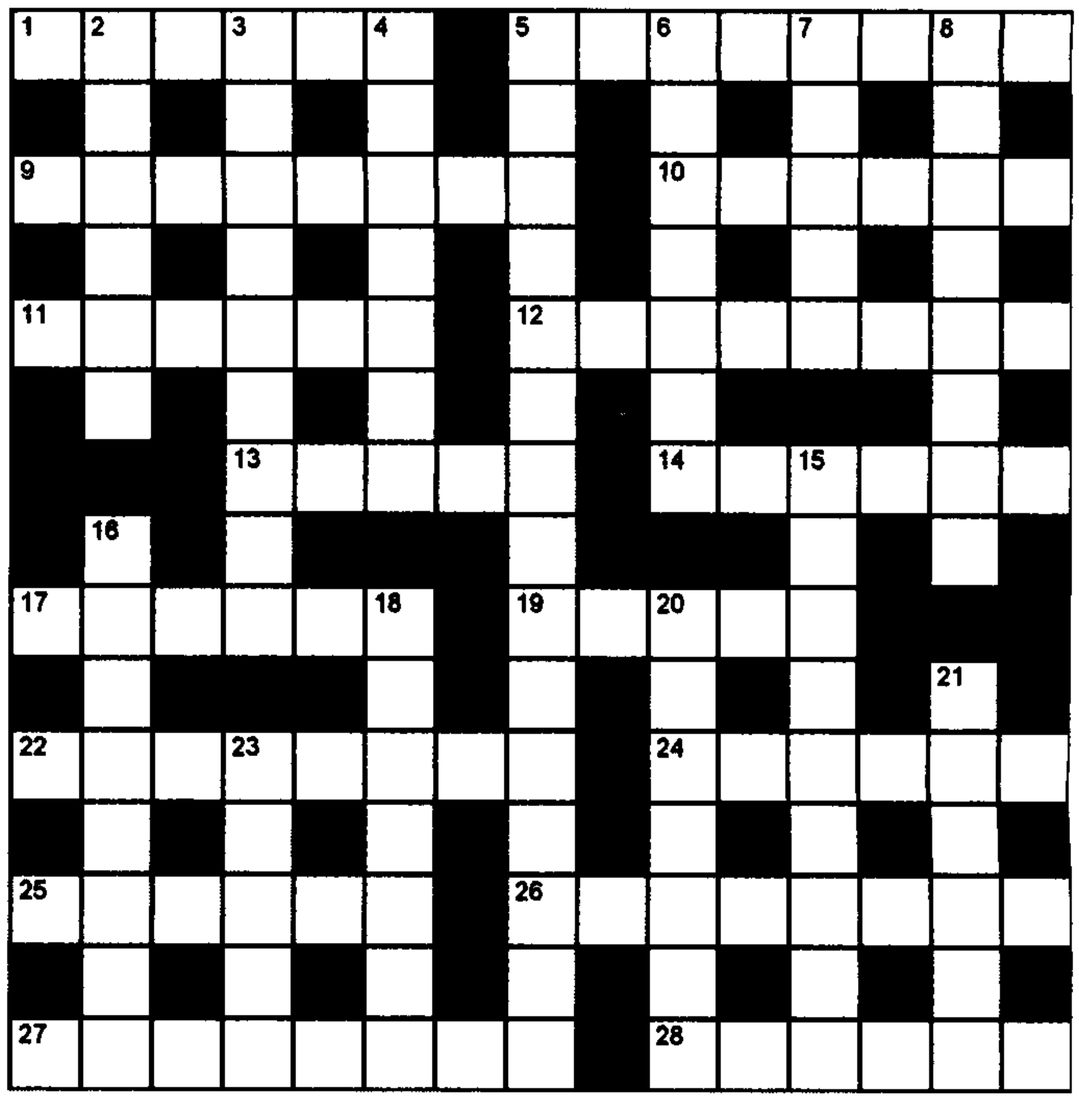


ACROSS

1 Where to stick brats in the workplace? (6)
5 Withdraw whip in retaliation (8)
9 Having a shag in sun, being a deck hand? (8)
10 Lost your shirt? Play the stock market (6)
11 One who feels good nuzzling up to cowboy? (6)
12 Such as Howe came to have of screwing Maggie? (3,5)
13 Emasculated headcases, publicists! (5)
14 One who gives head aggressively! (6)
17 Bloody hell! Labour encourages leaders to embarrass the Speaker (6)
19 Many religious followers' lives hit (5)
22 Shagging accepted by the "bird" at Christmas (8)
24 Row of tits on horseback (4-2)
25 Hard-on? Make love once, then wither (6)
26 Time, during hernia operation, to get head of willy exposed (2,3,3)
27 Unthinking, has joint as well as Charlie (8)
28 Talk to sailor about arse (6)

DOWN

2 Single? Get Cherry, perhaps, around – phwoar! (6)
3 Tawdry Conservative, creepy character, reportedly, mounting sailor (9)
4 Saying "Elizabeth's top gobbler" and stuff (7)
5 'Fat hip' Little Richard, a macho, cocky, number one dealer (3,8,4)
6 Bill Labour's number one nit wrecked, getting protection of party (7)
7 Shag for example is out in the buff? (5)
8 Did a Mick Jagger, shaking head and ass (wrinkly's butt) (8)
15 Getting an erection makes belly whiff, note, internally (9)
16 Go soft and fluff – a disastrous failure (8)
18 One can't get it from a good looker? (4,3)
20 Expensive menu item? Chuck rest out (7)
21 Name one universal gay movement taking precedence in this country (6)
23 Cover up, sweet (5)

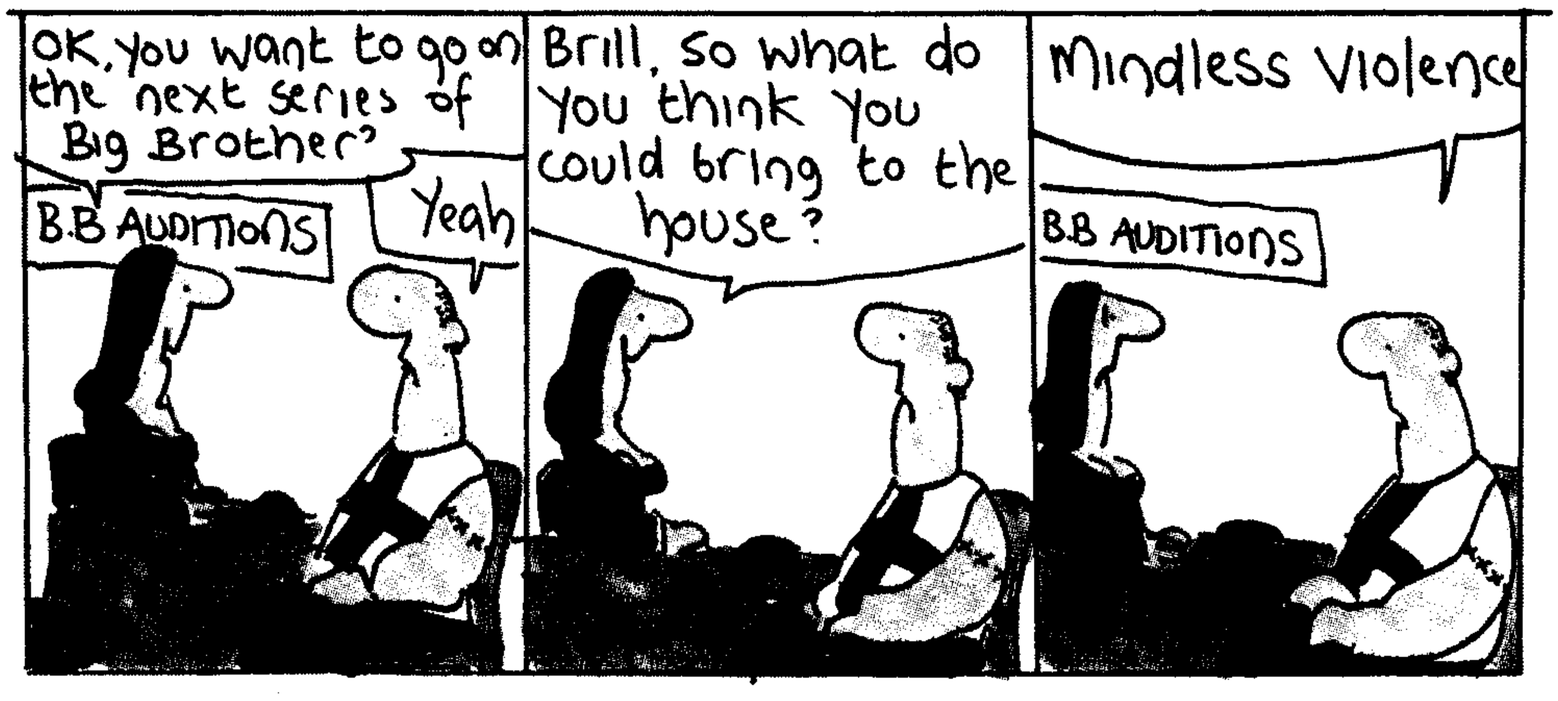
Crossword 309 winner: DOB RUSSELL

ACROSS: 8 Advocate 9 Uproar 10/7/16 Singing from the same hymn sheet 11 Stoned 13 Curtsey 14 Slut 18 Wembley 20 Coffee 22 All piss and wind 25 Beagle 26 Astonish.

DOWN: 1 Addict 2 Tough nut 3/17ac. Mainline 4 Self 5 Autoerotic 6 Brutus 12 Disclaimer 13 Chewy 15 Lawmaker 17 Left wing 19 Malign 21 Ernest 23/24 Stagnate.

Yobs

HUSBAND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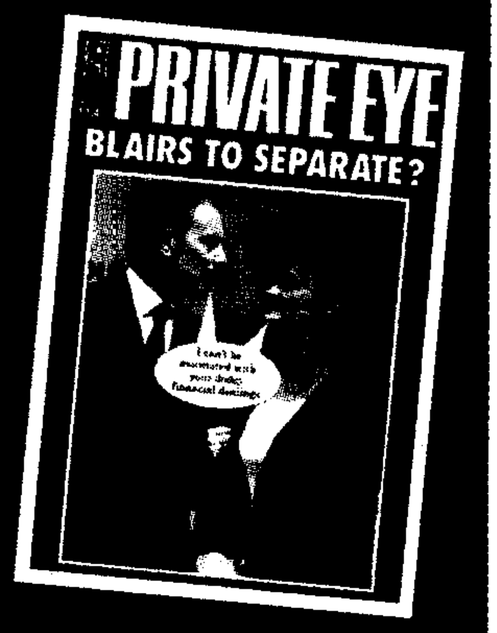

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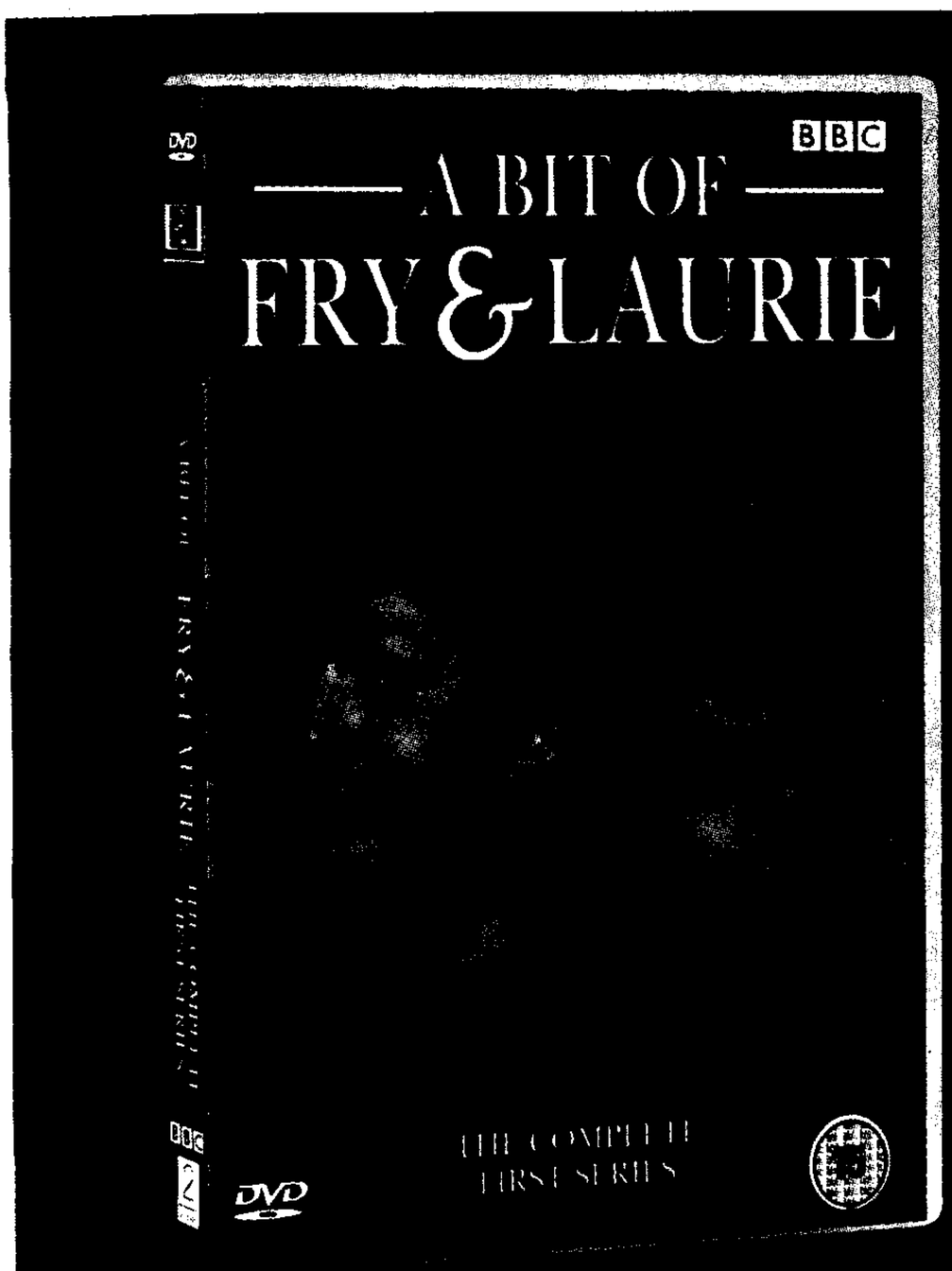

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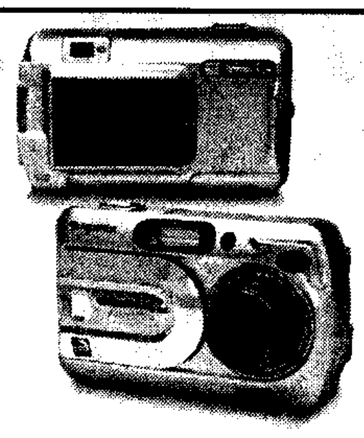

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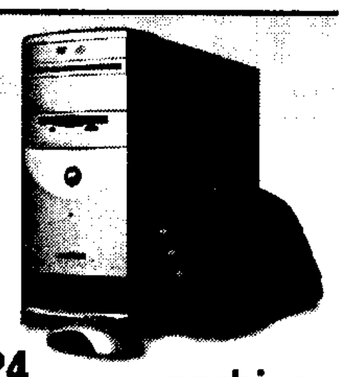

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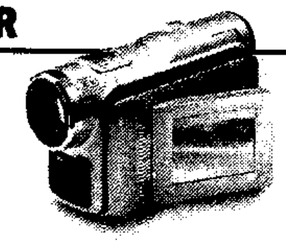

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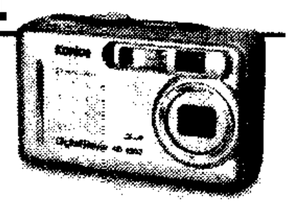

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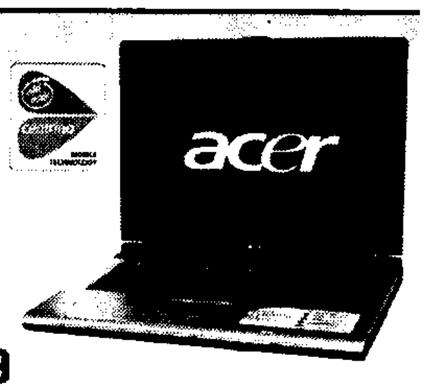

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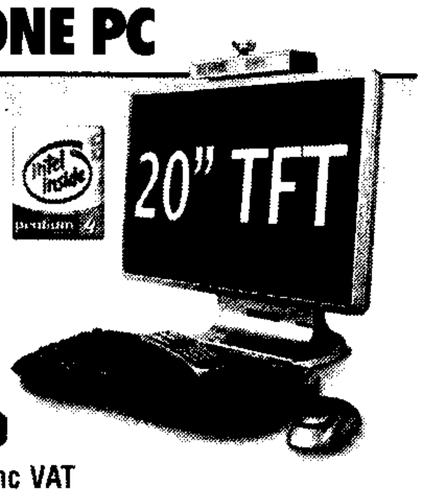

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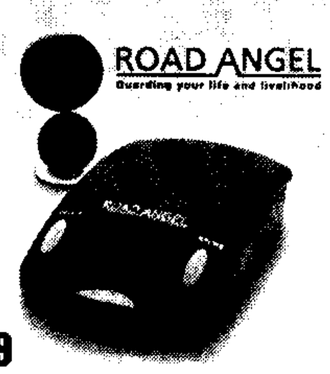

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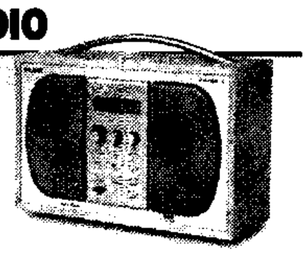

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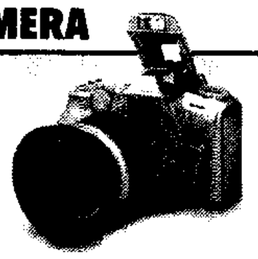

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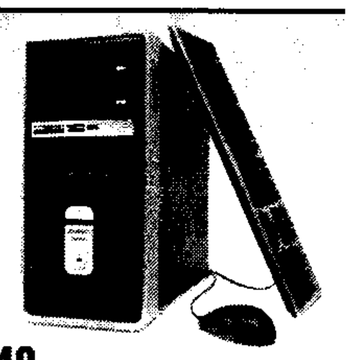

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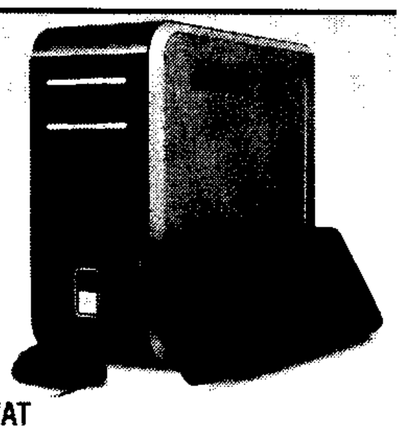

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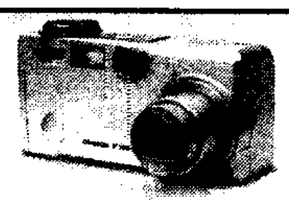

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A suitable man to spark a men's clothing revolution

Consider this proposition. Would you rather pay the same sum for a single, off-the-peg, chain store suit cut by a computer and sold to you by a spotty boy who thinks side vents are to be found on a Lambretta scooter, or for two bespoke, custom cut, hand-stitched suits, measured and sold to you by a man for whom suits are a lifetime's passion?

The British clothing chain store has a lot to fear from ***Mr. Raja M Daswani*** of Kowloon. If there were a global ambassador for men's suiting, Mr Daswani, who owns and runs Hong Kong's biggest tailoring business, would be that man. He and his family team measure and make hundreds of suits a week for discerning clients across the world.

Indeed, so successful is ***Mr. Daswani***, that – a little unnervingly as he is measuring you up – he freely admits he doesn't really need to work any more: 'My team is as experienced as I am. But I just love men's suits and I wouldn't feel right sitting at home. It's not a business. It's a mission.

'I love seeing customers walk in a really bad suit that cost them a fortune and walk out in one of our suits that's perfect in every way, made with a good heart in a superior fabric for a half or a quarter as much.'

The price of a Daswani shirt and suit are astonishing. We are talking from £19 (£25 including tax and duty) for a custom shirt and £129 (£169 including tax and duty) for a fully lined, made-to measure suit in a lightweight wool or linen, to £250 (£325 including tax and duty) for a 100 per cent wool, entirely hand finished suit in a British cloth, with every refinement from handmade button holes to knee lining. Even the most expensive suit, made in deluxe superfine wool for £1,500 (£1,950 including tax and duty), costs a third less than it would on **Savile Row**.

Raja Daswani may be based in Hong Kong, but his sartorial mission to the badly dressed and overpaying British customer brings him to the UK as often as once a month. He and his team take over hotel suites in major cities, so British customers can make an appointment and get the full Kowloon Monty.

Measurements and digital photos are taken here and emailed to Hong Kong. Often, your suit will be started on by a tailor 6,000 miles away before you've even left the hotel. You can have it couriered within a week or so, or wait for a second fitting when the Raja team hits your town again a few weeks later.

It now remains to see whether the Raja revolution, with its inspired mix of artistic flair, entrepreneurial genius and digital technology, will see the end of the off-the-peg British chain store suit. On price alone, it's a sartorial solution that will even please the Suits in accounts.

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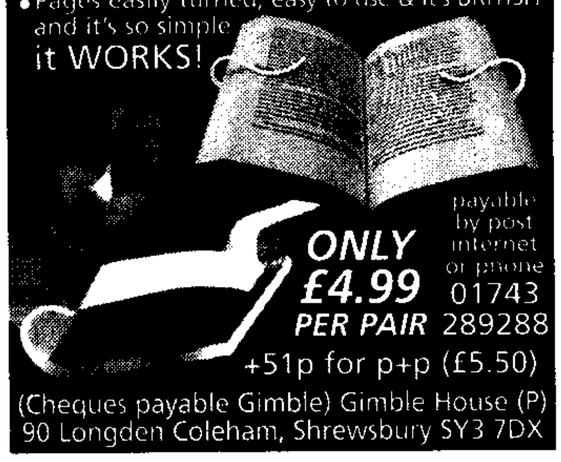

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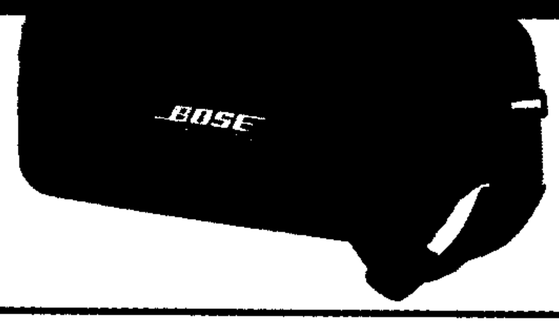

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